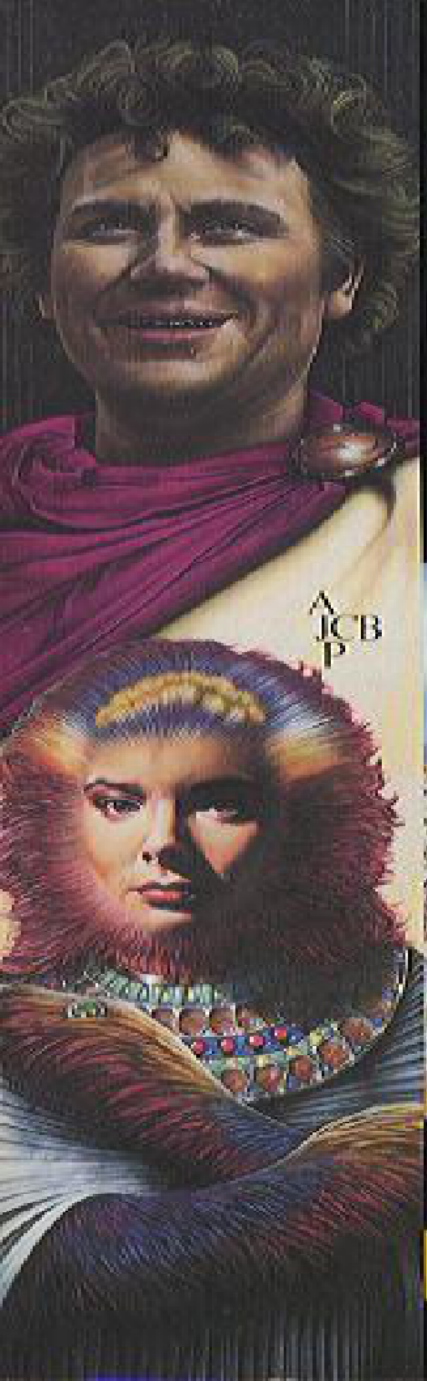
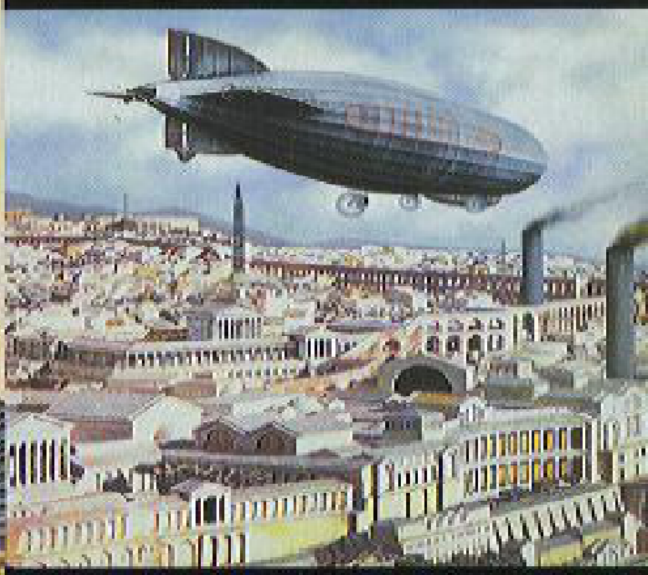


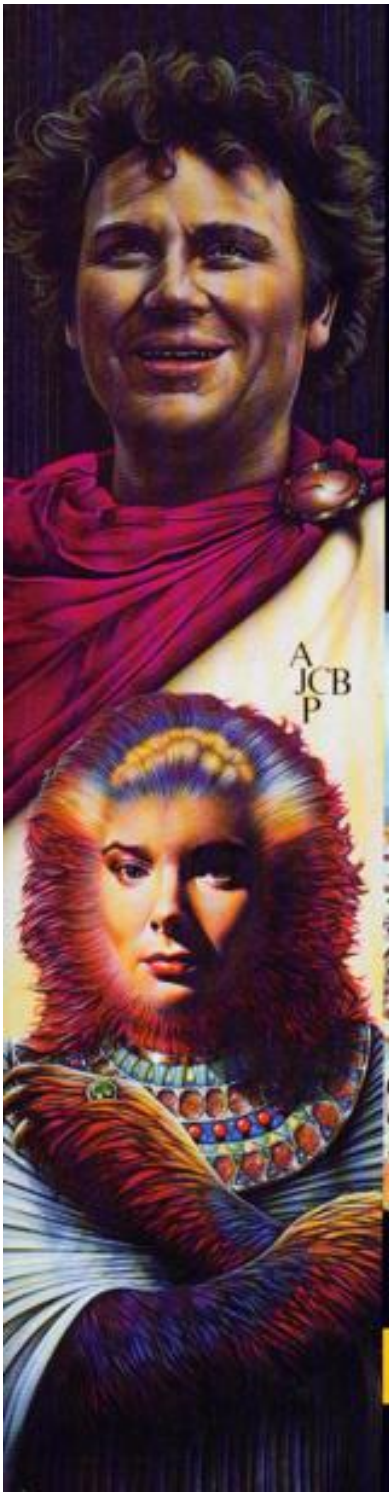
DOCTOR WHO

THE MISSING ADVENTURES



STATE OF CHANGE

CHRISTOPHER BULIS



DOCTOR WHO

THE MISSING ADVENTURES

STATE OF CHANGE

CHRISTOPHER BULIS

STATE OF CHANGE

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL FEATURING THE SIXTH DOCTOR AND PERI

'IN LESS THAN 25 YEARS THE ROMANS HAVE INVENTED ELECTRICITY GENERATION, AIRSHIPS, RADIO AND WHO KNOWS WHAT ELSE. IS THAT REASONABLE?'

Ancient Egypt, 41BC. The Doctor and Peri watch as Cleopatra's pleasure barge glides up the Nile in preparation for her fateful meeting with Mark Anthony. And an alien presence observes the TARDIS, waits for it to dematerialize, then pounces.

When the time ship lands, the Doctor and Peri find themselves in ancient Rome, in the tomb of Cleopatra. But something is very wrong. The tomb walls depict steam-driven galleys and other disturbing anachronisms. The Roman Empire is preparing for a devastating war – using weapons from the future capable of destroying the entire world.

This adventure takes place between the television stories **REVELATION OF THE DALEKS** and **TRIAL OF A TIME LORD**.

Having established himself as a designer, artist and illustrator, **CHRISTOPHER BULIS** is now forging a career as a successful writer. He is the author of **DOCTOR WHO – SHADOWMIND**.

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Science fiction/TV tie-in

STATE OF

CHANGE

Christopher Bulis

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It is no matter. Let no images

Be hung with Caesar's trophies. I'll about, And drive away the vulgar from the streets; So do you too where you perceive them thick.

These growing feathers plucked from Caesar's wing Will make him fly an ordinary pitch,

Who else would soar above the view of men

And keep us all in servile fearfulness

Julius Caesar Act: 1 Scene: 1

Prologue

The vessel, enfolded within its private micro-universe, tumbled silently through the infinite grey void. It fell towards the place where matter and energy are one, where the dimensions that defined the very structure of reality become blurred and meaningless things. At the heart of the grey void lay the vortex of hyperspace.

Then the vessel *changed*.

Its artificial cusp of twisted time and space constricted, dividing into two unequal portions. The neck between the two shrank and disappeared, and they separated. The larger section vanished, dropping out of hyperspace and into reality once more. The smaller section fell on through the void alone, towards the vortex.

Within one of the compartments of the abandoned subsection, its single occupant laboured feverishly over a tangled mass of complex circuitry that littered the floor. Open service panels and conduits in the compartment's oddly patterned walls showed where cables and servo modules had been torn from their housings. The dim lighting flickered every few moments, causing the worker to glance quickly up at a monitor screen set into one wall, before returning to her task with renewed vigour. Her coldly attractive features were set and implacable, as though by sheer will power she could force the improvised control board she was assembling to function.

On the monitor screen, the image of the vortex expanded: a swirling maelstrom of blazing, impossible, eye-searing colours, shaping themselves into writhing streamers and eddies that could swallow a sun. Steadily, inexorably, the fascinating yet terrifying scene grew larger, filling and then overflowing the screen, until all that could be seen was a single dark rent in the boiling energy storms, gaping like a hungry mouth.

Then, with a sharp, exultant cry, she was finished. Her nimble fingers danced across the contacts on the improvised panel. On the monitor, the details of the vortex surface slowed their rate of expansion, then started to drift across the screen. The vessel's fall had become a safe orbit about the vortex.

For a few moments she allowed herself the luxury of inactivity, letting the knots of tension untwist within her. It had been a close run thing, but she had survived, as a superior being always would. He thought he had left her for dead, but he would find out otherwise —

to his cost. Her lips parted in a mirthless smile as she contemplated the sweetness of her revenge. Now, what would be the best way? Do to him what he had to her, of course. But she would be more thorough than he had been, naturally. He had assumed she was doomed and had left her. Such stupidity, such arrogance! When the time came, she would be able to actually see him suffer until the end, until she was certain that —

A warning light flashed amid the tangle of hastily assembled components and cables that webbed the floor. She frowned at this intrusion on her pleasant line of thought, and adjusted a control. The image on the monitor screen slipped aside as the camera turned to look forward. Over the churning, tormented limb of the vortex, silhouetted against the grey of the void, a dark speck had risen, swelling in size even as she watched, resolving itself into a perfect jet-

black disc. Something else was in orbit about the vortex with her.

In the same orbit, but travelling in the opposite direction ...

Too late, she started to work the controls, trying to change course, trying to rise above the object that had become a pit of night hurtling towards her crippled vessel.

For one terrible moment, the monitor showed nothing but absolute and total blackness.

Then the hole in the void fell on along its endless orbit about the vortex. Alone.

I

The regular beat of the stroke drums of Cleopatra's royal barge drifted across the sapphire waters of the Nile. Twin rows of oars dipped and pulled in time, driving the stately craft up the broad, slow river towards Rosetta. From the canopied deck, thin streamers of sweet incense billowed and spread in its wake, whilst two slave girls leaned over the prow, casting handfuls of fluttering petals onto the waters before them. Sunlight glinted off the barge's golden ornamentation and glowed on its brilliant paintwork.

On the river bank, the sunlight also glinted off a telephoto lens protruding through the scrubby grasses that capped a low sandhill.

The sound of a camera shutter clicking rapidly could be heard.

Behind the screen of grasses, the young woman operating the camera brushed a strand of her dark, collar-length hair back beneath her sunhat, adjusted the focus, and shot another series of pictures. By her side, a tall man also lay prone, observing the scene through a long, brass-bound, nineteenth century naval telescope.

Gradually, the drum beat faded away as the barge shrank in the distance. The woman lowered her camera, revealing keen, attractive features, dark eyes and a delighted smile.

'Cleopatra's own personal royal yacht,' she exclaimed, speaking in a light American accent, ànd I've got it on film!' She paused thoughtfully for a moment, then chuckled ruefully. 'I guess nobody'll believe me even so, Will they, Doctor?'

Her companion lowered his spyglass and regarded her with mild

reproach, his brow furrowing beneath his mop of curled, honey—

tinted hair. He spoke in precise tones, like a kindly but censorious schoolmaster.

'My dear Peri, I sincerely hope you do not intend to exhibit those photographs to all and sundry when you return home. I only agreed to you bringing that camera on the understanding that any pictures remained private. Have you any notion of the potential temporal paradox arising from a society discovering proof that time travel is possible before it should? Besides,' he added, a hint of exasperation entering his manner, 'is it not enough that you know what you've seen?' He shook his head in apparent despair. 'Really! I take you to witness a little-known historical incident: namely the preparatory cruise of Cleopatra before her journey to Tarsus and her epic meeting with Mark Antony, and you are more concerned with the record of the event than the experience of actually being here.'

Peri grinned. She was getting used to the Doctor's minor impassioned outbursts by now, and had learned not to take them to heart. She responded with carefully judged innocence: 'But Doctor, you never really explained why she came here?'

The stern schoolmaster became an eager lecturer. When it suited him, the Doctor delighted in disseminating knowledge. 'Ah, well, this was purely to rehearse her arrival in Tarsus. Remember, she had been summoned by a triumvir, one of the most powerful men in the world at the time, and effective master of Rome's Eastern possessions. She wanted to leave nothing to chance, knowing that her future might depend on the impression she made. Her actual journey up the Cyndus was far more splendid than what we've seen today. This was only a — .'

`Dry run?' Peri suggested.

The Doctor snorted at the pun.

Peri added quickly: 'Kind of calculating, wasn't she?'

The Doctor's eyes narrowed reflectively. 'I would say rather, she was a product of her day.' He sat up and waved an arm expressively across the marshes and shallow lakes of the Nile delta to the horizon, disturbing a flock of ducks in a nearby pool, which took flight in a clatter of wings. 'This was the centre of the world for the people of this age, and the struggle was on for its dominance. Life was inherently hard, and for such stakes, practically any form of

behaviour, however ruthless, was acceptable. The final prize would justify the means. You can hardly judge them by the standards of your own period.'

For a long while he was silent and thoughtful. Peri sensed he was looking back on his own past, contemplating more years and experiences than she could comfortably conceive. She felt a tingle run up her spine. Moments like this made her conscious of the gulf that would always divide them.

Briskly she got up and brushed off her knees and the front of her shorts. Despite her light clothes, she felt sticky in the humid warmth of the delta. Beside her, the Doctor stood up and shook off his long, multi-coloured frock coat which he had been resting on. He seemed unfairly cool, as always.

'I'll say one thing about photos, Doctor: she said, swatting the air as they made their way down the sandy slope. 'The heat and flies don't come with them!'

Nestling in a hollow at the foot of the sand-hill was the anachronistic form of an antiquated British police call box.

As they walked up to it, Peri ventured: 'If Cleopatra's arrival in Tarsus is so showy, I don't suppose we could ...'

'Not with that camera,' he said firmly. 'Tarsus would be far too public to risk it being seen. Let alone the personal danger, imagine the effect of a device like your camera falling into the wrong hands in the wrong age. Far worse than your pictures. The timeline might not stand the strain.' He drew a key on a length of black ribbon out of an inner pocket.

Peri was undaunted. 'Well, can we go somewhere and see the sights, then? I mean properly mix with the people and such.

Somewhere really old and classical.'

The Doctor inserted the key in the door of the police box and smiled at her. 'You exhibit your nation's renowned fascination with antiquity merely for its own sake. Has travelling with me not taught you yet, that time is relative and simply a question of point of view?'

'Maybe I'm simply not as jaded a traveller as you are, Doctor. I mean, what did you Time Lords build TARDISes for otherwise —

and why keep all those different clothes in the wardrobe room?

Anyway, can we try it?'

He looked for a moment at her intent and eager face, and remembered when he too had been young. So long ago. He smiled suddenly, his face like an impish schoolboy. 'Yes, I think we might at that' He opened the door of the police box, and they stepped into another universe.

The seeker followed the trail with senses that do not even have names.

The trail ran through the millennia and across the light centuries.

Mosdy there was no pattern to its meanderings, and the trail might suddenly double back on itself for no reason. Sometimes it formed a complicated loop through the higher dimensions before continuing.

On a couple of occasions it actually branched into separate tracks and travelled parallel with itself before conjoining again., None of this troubled the seeker. Time was irrelevant to it, and, as every sensation was a new one, 'tenacity' and 'patience' were simply experiences it had not encountered before. If any emotion could be applied to the seeker, then it might be said to be happy. By analogy, it might be likened to an extra—cosmic cat chasing a yarn of wool between the stars and through the ages, trying to catch the unravelling ball at the end.

External appearances can be deceptive, thought Peri, not for the first time.

She and the Doctor stood by the TARDIS's main console, which sprouted like a high-tech hexagonal mushroom from the control room floor. Outside the doors were the heat, sand and flies of Egypt in forty-one BC. Inside it was timeless. As the Doctor fussed over the controls, she looked around the spacious white, coolly lit room that had become part of home for her in recent months.

The room's irregularly curving walls were formed of many panels, patterned with vertical ranks of recessed circular mouldings, some of which glowed softly, occasionally broken by inset, Doric-style fluted columns. Scattered about the room was an odd mixture of furniture that, perhaps, indicated the Doctor's feelings for his favourite planet: a Sheraton chair, a Chippendale, a large Chinese pot belonging to a dynasty Peri had never heard of, and a massive brass-bound sea chest (from which had come the vintage telescope). On a carved stand was a bust of Napoleon, whilst on its twin was an ormolu clock. Peri had

seen the Doctor regularly wind and set the clock to match, presumably, ship's time — except that seemed a little unlikely, considering the nature of the ship. The most brightly coloured object in the room was the Doctor's flamboyant coat, which hung by itself on a tall hatstand.

'I think Rome, about the year one hundred and fifty AD, by your calendar,' the Doctor said, lifting his gaze from the timeline display, and beaming at Peri. 'The rule of Emperor Antoninus Pius. That should be the optimum period to see many of the .great buildings at their best, whilst the social conditions were at their most stable.

Something of a "Golden Age" by the standards of the time. I'll just check to find the precise destination details' He turned his attention back to the screen again.

'Sure, that sounds fine, Doctor. Look, I'm going to wash some of this dust off, so take your time.' She made for the doorway leading to the interior of the timeship, then hesitated. 'Say, Doctor. We are going to try to blend in with the locals, right?'

'Of course. That's the main point of the exercise.'

'So, you won't be wearing your coat?'

The Doctor gazed almost regretfully at the gaudy item.

'Unfortunately, it wouldn't match the local styles.'

Peri beamed. 'That's great, Doctor. I can't wait to see you in a toga!'

' *Here ... found it.* Me found it! What you want is here!'

The voice was strange and harsh. It boomed as though projected by some giant speaker from a great distance, and the pitch and inflection varied between words, suggesting the language used was not simply unfamiliar to the speaker, but that speech itself was a novelty. The words might have been pieced together from a conversation overheard, and now repeated without the user quite being sure of their precise meanings.

'Good, well done,' said another voice. 'Show me where it is located'

These words were commanding, cool and clear, and without any uncertainty. 'Yes, I see. Now, I am going to tell you what to do next

... '

Towelling herself off after her brief shower, Peri was only mildly surprised to find her en suite bathroom now had a second door.

Cautiously passing through it, she found herself by the side of the TARDIS's swimming pool. She was fairly certain that the door had not been there that morning. She was even more certain that the last time she had used the pool, it had been some way down the TARDIS's long, curving main corridor. Perhaps, she mused, if she went to check, she would find it still was down the corridor. After all, there were, as far as she knew, no rules about the behaviour of swimming pools in police telephone boxes. She wondered if the Doctor had arranged this little trick of trans-dimensional engineering himself, or if some automatic system of the TARDIS had noted her regular use of the pool, and rearranged things to be more convenient for her. She shrugged. She would find out later; meanwhile, a cold plunge was an appealing idea.

She hung up her towel and walked around the pool-side to the high diving board, thinking that the decor was most appropriate, considering their intended destination. Any self-respecting Roman emperor would approve of the acres of richly veined marble flooring, the massive, classically styled columns that lined the pool itself and the great hanging baskets that threw out sprays of colourful blooms, or trailed long, exotic tendrils in the water. Of course, the classification of the plants would have been beyond him — but then, they were beyond her as well, and she was a student of botany. Just one more item the Doctor had picked up on his travels, she supposed.

Curiously, the Doctor never used the pool, as far as she could tell.

Perhaps, in some former incarnation, he had been a keen swimmer, but it no longer appealed to his current personality. Perhaps the TARDIS was patiently maintaining the room for that day when its owner would once more require its facilities. How long might that be, she wondered?

Beside the foot of the diving board steps was a small control panel mounted on a polished metal pillar. Peri made a careful adjustment to one of the controls, then climbed the steps three at a time, in long, effortless strides, almost bouncing to the top board.

Something no Roman emperor could possibly have owned, of course, was a pool with an adjustable gravity control.

Peri stepped to the end of the board, flexed her knees and thrust upwards, rising impressively in the low gravity. Her second spring was higher still, and the third took her nearly to the barrel-vaulted roof of the pool, which was decorated with a vividly coloured pastoral fresco. The style was somewhat reminiscent of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. This was unsurprising as they were both painted by the same hand.

Peri tucked her body and tumbled backwards, falling lazily out of the false sky of the fresco and down towards the sparkling waters of the pool.

In the control room, the Doctor entered the final set of co-ordinates into the navigation system and engaged the hyperdimensional drive.

'All ready,' announced the slow, booming voice. 'But hard to see to read only what you want.'

'Well, read more around it if you have to,' the commanding voice insisted.

'Read more — how much?'

'Read it all if you have to, but do it now!'

'Understand. Reading all ...'

There was a long pause.

A pulsating, wheezing sound grew in volume, reverberating across the mud-flats and disturbing the wildfowl once again. The incongruous telephone box faded into nothingness, like morning mist touched by the sun.

'Why is it taking so long? Show me what you're reading. No! Not all of that as well! I meant just the — .'

'Not want all? Said you did want all.'

'Not that! Have you no sense of *proportion*, you fool? Only read what you must! Never mind, do it *now*!'

'But have read more now. What to do with it? And tell what is

"proportion"? What is "fool"?'

The water in the pool surged up in a great wave and engulfed Peri as she was completing her third somersault. She disappeared in a

foaming, roaring confusion of bubbles and streaming shreds of pool plants. The pool's large double doors burst open under the pressure, and Peri and the contents of the pool poured out into the corridor.

Her flailing hands caught hold of the rim of one of the circular wall mouldings, and she clung on desperately as a few hundred cubic yards of water rushed past her, sucking the breath from her lungs and tearing at each strand of her hair as it tried to peel her from her anchorage.

Gradually, the flow subsided, receding along the curve of the dimly lit corridor.

Peri slithered down the wall with the falling water level, coughing and drawing in rasping lungfuls of air, to finally slump in ankle-deep water in the angle with the floor. For a moment she was still, then, grimly levering herself upright and pulling a sodden plant frond off her face, she drew in a deep breath.

'Doctor!' she hollered. 'What the hell is going — .'

Lights flickered and the corridor pitched under her. For a moment gravity failed, and she bounced off the opposite wall amid a shower of weightless water droplets. Then she was plucked out of the air and dropped heavily to the floor of the corridor again. She scrabbled to the side wall and braced herself into the angle, leaning to keep upright. 'Down' seemed to have changed direction and now lay nearer the end of the corridor than below it.

Peri was drawing in another breath to give vent to her feelings once more, when there was a rush and boom of water from the 'top' of the corridor as a foaming wave broke around the curve and bore down on her. The contents of the pool had returned. She grabbed the edge of the wall moulding again.

' *Oh shiii* ...' The rest was lost in the roar of the water.

The control room pitched and tossed like a ship in a hurricane.

The Doctor clung to the control console, scanning the madly flickering readings and warning lights and stabbing at buttons.

Furnishings slithered across the floor, and the hatstand carrying his coat toppled gracelessly over. From somewhere outside the TARDIS

came a howling and moaning, as though the craft were being buffeted

by a great wind.

A torrent of water poured in through the doorway and spread out into a shallow pool, depositing a sodden white bath towel, several plant fronds and a bedraggled Peri on the floor. She rolled and slithered against the wall and grabbed the heavy sea-chest for support. 'What's happening?' she yelled over the noise, fear adding a shrill edge to her voice.

'We seem to be caught on the edge of a massive distortion in hyperspace,' he remarked, with rigid coolness. 'An interdimensional energy flux tube has opened up, and we appear to be travelling along it.'

'Can't we break free?'

'I am trying,' the Doctor responded tersely. 'Unfortunately, the energy is of a most peculiar form. It seems to be interfering with the controls, somewhat. It would be rather unwise to try anything dramatic at this moment.'

'So we'll just have to sit it out, huh?'

'Probably, probably ...' The Doctor's gaze appeared to fix on the displays.

'Don't kid me, Doctor; tell it like it is.'

'The TARDIS's link with the Eye of Harmony has been broken, and I'm having to use reserve power to maintain the force field. The flux tube is also draining power from the systems.'

'So, how long will the reserve power last?'

There was a crackling noise and electric blue sparks danced briefly across the console, causing the Doctor to jerk his hands off the controls. The room lights flickered and dimmed rapidly to a dull red glow. The heartbeat-like rise and fall of the time rotor visibly slowed.

Peri could see the Doctor's face illuminated by the ghostly glow of the control panel lights — which were flickering and dying too.

'Not long, as a matter of fact,' the Doctor replied, with slightly strained understatement.

'Didn't you work out some sort of new emergency system after the last

time we had power trouble?'

The Doctor was becoming impatient. 'Of course I did,' he snapped.

There was an awkward pause.

'And?'

'A stand-by mass-converter is activated and begins transforming spare shell material into energy.' The Doctor scowled in annoyance.

'It appears, however, that the automatic trigger has failed.'

'Can't you start it manually?'

'The converter requires a certain power input to energize it before it can reach a self-sustaining output level. Unfortunately, we no longer have enough power left to initiate this process.'

'Oh, terrific!' Peri exclaimed bleakly.

One by one, the lights were going out. The time rotor ground slower. Peri could sense the ship's systems fading around her, leaving them exposed to the elemental forces outside. She had experienced a power loss in the TARDIS once before, which had forced them to go to Varos — an unpleasant memory — but this was far worse. It felt almost as though the ship was dying. The air felt chill and she was suddenly aware of being wet and naked and shivering in the encroaching darkness. She bit her lip against her rising fear, and said nothing in case her voice should give her away.

Then she felt the Doctor drape his coat over her shoulders, and gratefully she pulled it tight around her. The Doctor sat down at her side, bracing himself against the wall to counter the motion of the ship. At least she was not alone.

'How long can we last after all the power's gone?' she asked simply, forcing her voice to stay level.

To her surprise, the Doctor laughed. 'My dear Peri, we aren't finished yet. You ask about time inside a time machine, where it does not behave in familiar ways. Time and energy are far more freely interchangeable here, so when there is a s h o r t a g e o f o n e . . .'

His words slurred and deepened to inaudibility.

The last lights faded out on the console.

The time rotor ground to a halt.

A water droplet sluggishly fell off the end of a strand of hair plastered across Peri's brow — and slowed to a stop in mid air.

'Tell what is "proportion"? Tell what means "fool"? Why you no speak to me now?' There was no answer.

II

Captain Markus Lucivio scowled at the veil of fog that shrouded the galley, swallowing the sun in its clammy greyness. Where had it come from so suddenly? A cold wind had seemed to blow out of nowhere, as though an icy hand had touched him. For a moment he had felt dizzy. Then he realized the fog was forming. Now, even as he watched, the prow faded from sight.

'Back water!' he commanded. His order was echoed below deck.

The easy quarter stroke he had called as the fog descended was replaced by the wash of blades digging into the water and slowing the ship. Gradually, the creak and groan of a hundred and ten oars in their rowlocks died away. At least we're well clear of the shore, Lucivio thought, as the slender quinquereme drifted to rest, rolling gently in the slight swell. Best wait it out. Quick come, quick go, they say —

With a rush and swish of air, an object passed over the ship and splashed loudly into the water somewhere off the bow.

There was a confusion of shouts and a clatter of feet as the marines grabbed their weapons and stood ready, straining for sight or sound of an enemy. 'Oarsmen ready!' shouted Lucivio. But which way to steer? There was no sound now, bar the gentle slap of water along the hull. Surely they should hear any ship close enough to loose a catapult shot at them? And it would be a big craft too, to bear a weapon capable of lofting a sizeable shot like that sounded.

'Captain, *Captain*, in the water!' The excited voice came from somewhere forward, its speaker lost in the greyness. Lucivio pounded up the long deck from his command position in the stern.

Sullius was at the prow, leaning over the rail and pointing at something bobbing in the water at the edge of visibility. Lucivio strained to make out its form. It was clearly an artifact of some kind, but the silhouette fitted nothing he could readily call to mind. But if it

was what they had heard flying past them, then it was like no shot from a catapult he had ever seen. He scanned the enveloping fog again, but there was still no sign of another vessel.

'Get lines and hooks,' Lucivio ordered, with a slightly forced lightness in his words. 'Let's have a closer look at this strange prize Father Neptune has given us.'

Even as the crew grappled for the peculiar object, Lucivio realized the pale orange ball of the sun was showing through the fog, brightening even as he watched. Within minutes, blue sky showed through the clearing air. The object grated against the ship's side, sparkling and glittering as the fresh sunlight caught its intricately fashioned surfaces.

Now Lucivio was certain: he had never seen anything like it in his life.

The year turned.

In the ports of Southern Arabia, they waited for the expected return of the traders who had set sail for the west coast of India the year before, taking advantage of the favourable winds. They waited for cargoes of silk and ivory, spices and gems, pearls and tortoiseshell.

For a month beyond their expected return, nothing was heard of them, and there was talk of pirates or storms at sea. Then one ship did arrive, manned by a half—crazed crew, telling a horrific, impossible story.

Slowly, the rumour filtered north and west to Alexandria and the Roman lands. But little attention was paid to it. They had more immediate preoccupations.

'There's going to be a big battle,' Alexander Helios informed his sister, with the absolute certainty only an eight-year-old can command. He threw a pebble at his exquisitely fashioned model galley, floating in the ornamental pool, capsizing it in a satisfactory manner. Servants stood silently around the colonnaded perimeter of the Palace courtyard, keeping watch on the royal children as they played.

Cleopatra Selene looked up from the patterns she was drawing in her sand tray. 'How do you know?' she responded, with inherent inter-sibling suspicion.

'I heard father talking to Caesarion about it. A big battle at sea, between us an' Octavian and his Romans, but we're going to win, 'cos the Oracle told them so!'

'Has Caesarion seen the Oracle?'

'Suppose so.'

'That's not fair. He's our brother — why can't we see it if he can?'

'He's only half our brother, and he's lots older than us,' Alexander suggested.

Selene was silent for a moment, contemplating the vast gulf of seven years that separated them. 'Anyway, it's still not fair. Mother and father and Caesarion and all those soldiers seeing the Oracle.

Why not us?'

'And metalsmiths, and ship builders,' added Alexander.

'What?'

'They've seen the Oracle too.'

'They're just common. We're divine, mother said so. How can they see it when we can't?'

'I saw them! Being taken down the long hall to the special room. I asked Tutor if they were being taken to feed the crocodiles and he told me. Then he looked really worried and said it was all a secret and wouldn't say any more.'

'Could've ordered him. He's only a slave. Could've had him fed to the crocodiles.'

'Could I?'

'Course. You can do that if you're divine.' She paused thoughtfully for a moment, then added: 'Probably have to ask mother first.'

'Can't we ask mother if we can see the Oracle?'

'She'll just say we're too young, or it was only for men to see or something.'

'But mother sees it!'

'Course. She's the Queen. She can do *anything*.'

Alexander considered the implications. 'Is Caesarion a man now then?'

'Probably He says we should call him "Ptolemy Caesar" now I don't think he likes being called Caesarion any more.'

'Is he divine too?'

'Maybe he's half divine.'

'Silly! Can't be half divine.'

'How do you know? Maybe you can.'

Alexander hesitated, unsure of this theological grey area. He retreated to safer ground. 'But we're all divine, aren't we?'

'Oh yes.'

'So one day *we'll* be King and Queen and rule everything, then *we'll* have the Oracle all to ourselves!' he finished triumphantly.

'But Caesarion'll be there first because he's older.'

'Well, we'll just have to take it from him, won't we?'

The sea was littered with the debris of battle. Shattered oars, loose timbers, dead and dying men. The hulks of two dozen ships were fast foundering, their upper decks ablaze. Sad relics, rapidly falling behind as the battle line shifted north, chasing the remains of Agrippa and Octavian's retreating, decimated fleet.

Captain Lucivio scanned the lines, counting the ships of his own special squadron. By the Gods, they had all survived! A handful of craft, but they had turned the battle in their favour and no mistake.

Just the sight of them must have loosened Octavian's bowels. He knew he'd trembled himself when they first fired up the thing, but it had worked! They had cut through the lines before they knew they were on them, then made so much confusion that half the enemy ships were broadside on when the rest of the fleet arrived, and sitting targets for ramming.

Lucivio gazed fondly, and with not a little awe, at the large, hissing, rumbling boiler mounted on the deck, at the plume of smoke billowing from its tall chimney, and at the pumping pistons that turned the twin paddle wheels. Not an oar in sight and better speed than a crew of the strongest rowers could equal. And he could keep it up as long as he had fuel to burn.

One of the ship's new cannons boomed from the prow, and the shot splashed amongst the retreating craft. 'Hold your fire until we're closer!' he bellowed, above the pounding of the engine. 'Full steam!'

he ordered the valveman. The ship, a quinquereme in name only now, surged forward, carrying Captain Markus Lucivio, commander of the First Steam Squadron of the Romano-Egyptian navy, into a new future.

III

Ptolemy Caesar, tribunus laticlavius of the Fifth Legion of the Romano—Egyptian Dominion, stood at the top of the sweeping beach and surveyed the scene before him.

This was how my father must have felt when he first set foot on the shores of Britain, he thought: a new land to tame, a chance to shape destiny. For a moment his mind turned to the great man he had never really known, and he felt that familiar burning thread of both pride and loss pulse within him once again. I will be worthy of your name, Father, I will. But allow me a little time to make my mark; remember, you did not have to follow in the footsteps of such a legend. After all, I'm not yet twenty—four.

The landing north of the Mouths of the Indus had been made without opposition, and the veterans of the Battle of Rhodes and the Siege of Tarentum were able to disembark their landing craft without even wetting their boots. Out to sea, the expedition's larger ships, mostly converted merchantmen, with rigging still bristling about their funnels, kept their cannons trained suspiciously inland. Scurrying between them and the shore were the shallow draft landers: modified light galleys carrying two centuries of troops, with their kit, on each journey. Men assembled by ranks on the beach, sunlight glinting off the bayonets of their long rifles. Soon the muddy sand was churned and rutted by feet and hooves and the long scars of gun carriage tracks.

Ptolemy turned his gaze inland, towards the shallow, fertile valley of the great river. The area was more lush than the reports he had seen had led him to expect, especially in trees. That was good.

Timber was required not only for constructing the Legion's base camp, but also for the hungry boilers of their ships. Back in Rome, Marcus Antonius had already directed the seeding of lands where forests might be expected to grow. Fire not only helped form the new

weapons of the Dominion, it propelled the fleet that carried them.

Fire was power, and must not fail for want of fuel.

Ptolemy followed the roadway up from the beach that had been cut through the low scrub, towards the site chosen for the encampment. It was on raised ground, above the level of any likely flooding, and its perimeters had already been staked out. As he watched, work was starting on the first of the defensive ditches. This was the Roman way. If possible, always build a secure camp before advancing to battle. Within hours, a tented encampment holding ten thousand men would have grown on this spot. Within days, the first permanent structures would be started by the Legion's auxiliaries.

The conquest of India had begun.

On the second evening after the landing, as the staff commanders filed out of the Legate's tent having delivered their reports, he called on Ptolemy to wait behind.

Aulus Severus Glabrio, Senatorial Legate commanding the Fifth Legion, was small and wiry, just past forty, with grey-shot hair and sharp, intelligent eyes. He contemplated the lean young man with the strong nose and high forehead who stood before him with, it seemed, an uneasy interest. Then he gestured to a small, folding stool, one of the few amenities the spartan shelter possessed.

'Sit down ... Tribune,' he said. Ptolemy sat, alert and respectful.

There was a moment's awkward silence, then Glabrio blurted out, as though in disgust: 'By Hades, I hardly know how to address you properly!'

' "Tribune" would seem sufficient, sir,' remarked Ptolemy.

'Then tell me, *Tribune*,' continued Glabrio with some feeling, 'just what it is you are doing here?'

'Fulfilling my position as your second in command, sir, to the best of my ability — .'

Glabrio waved a dismissive hand. 'Yes, yes, you've done all that has been required of you, even though you must have realized, I've had as little to do with you as possible. Well, on board ship there is slight opportunity for private conversation, and anyway — ' he smiled ruefully — 'I'm no sailor. The best thing that can be said for these

infernal new engines is that they reduce the time at sea.'

Ptolemy commented, straight faced: 'If the truth be known, I'm no lover of the sea either.'

For a moment the men stared solemnly at each other, then joined in mutual laughter. Glabrio got up and moved to a small chest in the corner, from which he produced a finely wrought decanter and two goblets. He served Ptolemy with wine and resumed his own seat.

'Now,' said Glabrio, more easily, 'I will ask again. What is Ptolemy Caesar doing here as only second-in-command of a legion, and without special retinue, when he could have had supreme command of any force he chose for the asking?'

'That is two questions,' replied Ptolemy. 'I will explain why I wish to be here in a while. But as to my status, that is simple. You know what experience I have of war, sir. Do *you* think I am ready for such a command?'

'Ah, I see now ... I think. No, you need a few more years yet before you're ready.' Glabrio's face darkened. 'You need to feel the twisting of your guts before the battle, but learn not to show it. To smell the fear of your troops and know how to rally their spirits. How to choose wisely, both in strategy and men, and stand by that choice.' He looked squarely at Ptolemy. 'Those are a few instances ... but words do not do them justice. You have to be there to learn such things.'

'Just so,' smiled Ptolemy.

'Well, may the Gods grant you good fortune. It's the hard road, but the only one for the way you're going. Rome ... that is, the Dominion, needs strong men to rule it, now the civil war is past. If you've half the quality your father had, then you'll last the course.'

'Thank you, sir. You could give me no better praise or encouragement than that.'

Glabrio chuckled. 'You'll pardon the thought now, Ptolemy Caesar, but I half feared you would be like those young equestrian pups they've given me for tribunes. There should be limits to what money and influence can buy.' He hesitated. 'But perhaps some of them are your friends?'

'Acquaintances at best. You would not have thought well of me if I had used my influence to bring mere friends along, however well I

thought of them. But to be fair, I think Potinus and Agricola have the makings of sound men.'

'Perhaps; we shall see. But now, we are getting off the track. You said there was a second part in answer to my question: why do you wish to be here, of all places?'

'Because the Dominion is ready to extend its frontiers, and also, because here there is an intriguing mystery to be unravelled. Tell me, what do you know of the history of this land in recent years?'

'Well, only the rumours, of course. Something happened here during the wars of the Triumvars: a great famine that wiped the land clean, perhaps. Those who survived made their way into Persia or across to Southern Arabia, bringing strange stories with them. There was also talk of an earthquake that closed the passes through the mountains of the north. I know there has been no silk or jade from the east for many years, so something must have occurred to interfere with the trade. But if it was famine, then I see no sign of it here; the country certainly seems fertile enough. I suppose it may have recovered over the years, though. I only hope the stories about a plague are not true. My soldiers will face anything they can see to fight, but an invisible sickness ...' He looked grave. 'I wondered about that, with Alexander's Port not far along the coast, seemingly deserted, and yet being ordered not to occupy it.'

'There is no plague,' Ptolemy said firmly. 'From all the reports I have read, and I have made a special study of such things, no plague caused this land to empty. But there are strange ... traces in Alexander's Port, that I wanted undisturbed until I could examine them personally? He smiled. 'You see, I have been using my influence to arrange matters. But not to satisfy mere personal curiosity, you can be sure. Sooner or later we would have come here.

When we do, in greater numbers, I wish us to be prepared. If there is anything strange about this land, any possible danger to the Dominion, then it must be identified. But, as you said, there have been rumours. In some places, tales of what happened here have led to panic. That must not be allowed to spread, which is why the details of this mission have not been made public.'

Glabrio was nodding. 'Yes, that makes sense. We are the scouts and there is always some danger in that. Very well, what are your orders?'

'No orders. You are in command of this Legion, Severus Glabrio, by

virtue of hard-won experience which, as yet, I cannot equal. I rely on you to continue to fill that post to the best of your ability, for the glory of Rome and the Dominion!' There was passion and indomitable authority in his words that demanded attention and respect. Yes, thought Glabrio, your father does live on in you — and no less, your mother. 'But,' Ptolemy continued, more evenly, 'I do have a request.'

'You have only to name it.'

'When the camp is secure, I wish to visit Alexander's Port, to find what I may. And then I will take a cohort up the Indus on landing craft, to explore as far as possible into the interior. Then ... well, that depends.'

'Take the First Cohort: twice the number of men and the best centurions. Remember what your father wrote about their worth?

Well, you'll have Marrius Rufinus as the most senior, and he would have approved of him most thoroughly.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Glabrio rose. 'We will discuss the details further tomorrow.' He smiled. 'Meanwhile, I think we should take our rest early. Clearly, there is much to be done' Ptolemy saluted and was turning to go when Glabrio said: 'I met your father once, you know, when I was young.'

Bright interest lit up Ptolemy's face. 'Truly, sir? I would be most grateful to hear anything of my father.'

'We shall talk of him, and many other things, I hope, when the business of the Dominion allows. But I will say this: in Tribune Ptolemy Caesar, I think he would recognize a worthy son.'

Six landing craft steamed in line astern up the broad, slow river, trailing wakes of churned water behind them from their new screw propellers. The air was heavy and the sun hot. Little moved on the banks save an occasional wading bird. Beyond the reeds and occasional drooping palm along the water's edge, they could see thickets of bamboo and brakes of mature trees, which sometimes merged into more substantial groves.

Ptolemy stood at the prow of the lead ship that carried the First Century. Beside him, mounted in blocks, the Legion pennant fluttered on the end of its staff, together with the wolf insignia of the Cohort and the spear bearing the old maniple rallying standard of the open palm.

There came the slap of flesh against flesh. Tribune Lucius Salvius Agricola wiped the remains of another mosquito from his neck and observed, with mild reproach: 'This new land of yours may be lacking in larger game and human inhabitants, but I can testify there is no shortage of stinging insects from personal experience. Does it ever get any cooler here?'

'Up in the mountains I believe it can be pleasantly temperate.'

'Oh, and how far away are they?'

'About ten days, at best. But I expect we shall be making several stops on the way as we come across any settlements, so — .'

'So I had better be off to find some more ointment for these cursed bites, because there will be more to follow shortly,' Agricola concluded resignedly, slapping at another insect. 'I shall return from this trip looking positively pock-marked, I know it. And I shall say to my parents: There, that is what comes of trying to make a man of me.

I was quite happy as I was and now look: a face no decent woman will share the same house with!' He started off in search of medicine.

'I have a theory that the people here simply left to escape these wretched insects!'

Ptolemy watched him leave with a smile. Agricola's complaints and apparent delicacy were quite superficial, he had discovered.

Fundamentally, he was a cheerful companion, whose manner concealed a stubborn streak of determination that would sustain him beyond the point where others might yield. At least, that was his judgement. Time would tell if it was a true one.

First Centurion Rufinus approached. 'All awnings rigged as ordered, sir,' he reported. Rufinus was a burly, grizzled man, with a prominent scar across his right cheek. His whole being suggested a steady imperturbability of character. He had keen, sharp eyes that missed nothing — as many a common soldier could testify.

'Well done. I want no one suffering from too much sun at this stage. Let the men build up a tolerance gradually. And make sure they wash down in river water as often as they need, but for Jupiter's sake, don't let it be mixed with our drinking water. We'll replenish that from somewhere faster flowing.'

'Understood, sir.'

'How is the fuel supply holding out?'

'Should last us through tomorrow, sir.'

'That is good. But should we see some suitable trees at anytime through the day, we will make a landing and cut some fresh firewood.' Ptolemy regarded the centurion thoughtfully. 'What do you make of this country, Rufinus?'

Rufinus scratched his chin with a rasping sound and surveyed the slowly moving scenery. 'Well, sir, that would depend on what it would be for. I've seen a few spots already that would make a nice bit of farm land, though I could do with it being a touch cooler. Now for fighting over, this is not so good. Too much cover. And, I like to have firm ground under my feet if I have to move quickly. Still ...' He patted the heavy revolver in its holster slung opposite his gladius... I reckon we have the edge on anything we're likely to come across, thanks be to the Gods for sending the Oracle' He paused, then lowered his voice, almost reverently. 'Your pardon for asking, sir, but the Oracle, is it as wonderful to behold as they say?'

Ptolemy smiled. 'Rufinus, it is undoubtedly the most remarkable thing I have ever seen.'

At noon the next day, they came across a deserted village on the river bank. A line of posts running out into the water suggested that a simple landing stage had once existed, but had rotted and washed away over the years. Most of the buildings still standing were of simple stick and thatch construction, but a few of the larger structures in the centre of the village were more substantial, with walls made out of local mud brick. While details were sent to cut fresh wood, Ptolemy took Agricola to examine the buildings more closely.

When he returned to the ships, his face was grave, and Agricola was so subdued he did not complain about the mosquitoes again until sundown. The expedition continued on up the river.

Ptolemy was shocked into wakefulness by the first honified cry of alarm ringing out into the darkness. Throwing off his blanket, he scrambled to his feet, pistol in hand.

The ships had been moored that night in the centre of the river in box formation: two astern and three abreast, linked by lines to stop them from drifting. No from the strip of water between the two rows, there

came a furious thrashing and plunging and wash of spray, rising over the cries of the sentries.

'Jupiter save us! What is it?' exclaimed Agricola, struggling out of his own covers to stand by his side. There sounded the crack of a rifle shot.

'I don't know. Follow me!'

They sprinted down the long deck, dodging the milling groups of freshly roused soldiers, who were grabbing at their own rifles and lining the rails.

There came the flashes and reports of more shots as they reached the stern. In the black waters, indistinct forms writhed and twisted.

Waves slapped the side of the lander, making it bob and sway. 'All ships, light your lanterns!' ordered Ptolemy. 'See what you're shooting at!'

One by one, the big ships' lanterns that hung over stern and prow were kindled from the small hand lamps. Torches of pitch-soaked reeds were lit and held aloft. Yellow light blossomed over the churning waters, blotting the stars from the sky. The soldiers stared aghast at what it revealed, tangled in a mooring line.

At first, Ptolemy thought there were several monstrous creatures, all madly twisting about together. Rearing high over the confusion, snapping at the sudden ring of lights that surrounded them, were two huge snake-like heads, whipping to and fro on long black, sinuous necks. Below them he caught a glimpse of a massive scaled and ridged back, resembling a crocodile's, whilst a long tail like that of a smooth lizard beat down with a smack on the water. Then the crocodile body twisted on its side, revealing a pale underbelly and powerful clawed and webbed legs, that tore at the rope which cut into its flesh.

There were three pairs of legs on its body.

Suddenly, Ptolemy realized what he was seeing.

It was just one creature: a chimera with two snake heads, a grotesquely extended crocodile body, and one long snake tail.

'Hercules's bane — a Hydra!' exclaimed Agricola, his voice cracking in fear.

Even as he spoke, the line entangling the creature snapped and the thing surged towards them, its twin heads rising high over the ship's rail. Slotted eyes gleamed madly. Forked tongues flickered in their gaping mouths, which bore not just the fangs of snakes, but also rows of cruel spiked teeth. A soldier discharged his rifle full into one head, then screamed in pain and fear as its twin whipped forward and closed its jaws over his shoulder, lifting him, kicking convulsively, clear of the deck.

The air filled with acrid gunsmoke, lit by orange spikes of flame, as the company poured shot after shot into the creature. Strips of flesh were torn from its neck, splattering dark blood over the seething waters. Other bullets ricocheted off the heavy scales of its body. The creature plunged about wildly, trying to find an escape from the circle of pain and confusion, its prize still struggling feebly in one set of huge jaws, while from the other came a fierce hissing like the venting of steam from a piston.

Then Ptolemy found Rufinus by his side, grenade in his hand, the fuse of which was spluttering down almost to the casing. With fine judgement, Rufinus tossed the device at the enraged animal so that it exploded as it struck.

There was a sharp concussion and a fountain of spray.

When the scene cleared, the creature was twisting feebly in the water, a great chunk blown out of its side, spilling entrails into the pink-tinted foam. The head carrying the soldier lolled motionless, his body drifting clear of its grasp. The other head weaved drunkenly in the air for a moment, hissing, gurgling and spitting blood as though in final defiance, before slowly collapsing to float limply beside its twin.

The great limbs gave a final kick and were still.

With a score of weapons still trained on the creature, men dived into the water to recover their comrade. Carefully, his body was lifted back on board. The cohort surgeon attended to him as best he could, but the man died a few minutes later from his wounds.

Ashen faced, Agricola turned to Ptolemy. 'What hell is there that breeds such creatures?' he asked numbly.

Ptolemy's face was set and unreadable, betraying nothing of his feelings. 'I do not know,' he replied evenly. 'But we will seek it out if we must, and tame it.'

'But if there are more ... *things* like this!'

Agricola's voice was rising in pitch, delayed shock setting in.

Ptolemy grasped his arm for a moment to steady him, his eyes fierce.

Not in front of the men, he was saying silently. Agricola swallowed, nodded, held himself in check. For the first time he was conscious of the true strength of will and purpose of his companion.

'Don't worry,' Ptolemy assured him. 'It died. It is only flesh and blood.'

Ptolemy turned away to order new watches to be kept. Agricola's eyes followed him. But we are also only flesh and blood, he thought.

The next morning the dead soldier was buried. The little fleet continued on up the river. Gradually, the nature of the land began to change.

It was over a year before Ptolemy Caesar returned to Alexandria, and from there to Rome. But he returned a changed man, burdened with the memory of an experience beyond understanding.

IV

Themos scrabbled amid the paper scraps and half-rolled scrolls overflowing the large table that dominated the centre of his cluttered workroom. Where was it, where was it? Finally he unearthed a strip of paper bearing a list of figures, which he compared intently with a second set scrawled on a wax tablet. Then he half ran to a celestial map pinned to the wall, displaying a rather over-decorated panorama of the heavens, in which the symbols of the zodiac had more prominence than the relative positions of the stars. He studied it for several minutes against the figures on the tablet. Then his thin shoulders sagged.

So, it was true.

For a long time he stood rooted to the spot. Then, carelessly, he tossed the wax tablet onto the table, where it knocked over an inkwell, the contents of which started to soak rapidly through the litter of documents. He did nothing to stop it. After all, nothing really mattered now, did it?

Despair almost threatened to overwhelm him. Then he made an effort to straighten up and regain his composure. Panic would get him

nowhere. He brushed back what remained of his straggling hair and tried to think in a clear and dignified manner. After all, whatever the circumstances, he was a natural philosopher: a man of reason and logic. By application of the principles he had studied, he would deduce the best course of action to take.

For some moments he stood with his eyes closed, mumbling under his breath as he turned over the relevant factors. Then he blinked suddenly. Yes, that was it! An entirely logical and reasonable response to the situation that confronted him.

Purposefully, he took his sunhat off the peg and placed it firmly on his head. He made his way carefully down the narrow stairs, favouring his arthritic hip, and into the passageway that led out onto the street of one of Rome's more modest districts. So preoccupied with his thoughts was he, that he almost collided with the gang of slaves who were in the process of anchoring a long, wooden pole into a freshly dug hole in the narrow pavement.

'By all the gods, what are you putting this here for!' Themos spluttered indignantly. 'It's blocking the path. Take it away at once!'

The work foreman interposed himself between Themos and the labourers. He assessed Themos's dress and accent and said firmly:

'All right, Greek. Keep it down, now. This is permitted construction, you know.'

Themos drew himself up as far as his height allowed. 'I, sir, am a Citizen of Rome and the Dominion. And I demand free and unobstructed passage down my street! What is this monstrosity?'

'Don't you read the notices, Citizen? This is for carrying the new wired lighting along a couple of streets. They've got some decent houses there, who are having it put in. And the company have got permission to run the lines through here, so let's have no more of your complaints.'

To the foreman's surprise, Themos started to laugh in an unsettling, slightly hysterical manner. 'Light, light!' he kept repeating between guffaws. 'Oh, there'll be plenty of that soon enough, then they won't need your wires and poles!' He stopped abruptly, and fixed the confused man with bulging eyes that held a distinctly manic gleam in their depths. 'Or else, there will be no light at all!' he announced dramatically. 'What will you do then, eh? Run your wires over the whole world to light it?'

And he tottered off, intermittently laughing and muttering, in the direction of the nearest tabernae — where he proceeded to get systematically drunk.

The ear-splitting clatter of Strabo's compressed air chisel reverberated around the narrow, steeply angled shaft that had been painstakingly cut and braced through the strata of earth and rubble.

Beside the bulky form of Strabo, Decius levered a new wooden beam into place, while Tiro shovelled the excavated material into a wicker hod, ready for sliding down the shaft by means of a rope pulley. Dust hung in the air, turning a hazy yellow in the glow of the wire-light work lamp, the power cable of which also ran back down the shaft.

The lamp blinked three times, and the men gratefully stopped work at the signal. The clatter of the drill faded away, and they made their hunched and slithering way down the shaft, pulling off their makeshift masks and ear protectors as they went.

There was a small, level chamber at the bottom of the shaft, just large enough to allow Strabo to stand upright. Here the excavated earth was transferred to one of the trolleys running along a set of wooden rails that disappeared down a horizontal tunnel, which also carried the power and compressed air cables. The three men crouched down on the tiny railway cars and pulled themselves along by their hands for almost a hundred yards.

The other end of the tunnel emerged into the excavated cellar of what had been a modest town house. Now it more closely resembled a miner's camp. In one corner was the small, hissing steam engine that powered the drill compressor pump. The smoke from the engine was gathered in an improvised flue pipe which ran away to the upper floor. Stacked about the walls were the paraphernalia of excavation: tunnel props, coils of rope, picks, shovels and hods of rubble, a pile of firewood for the engine. The chamber also contained Cassodorus, who solicitously offered mugs of water, which they downed thirstily.

'Well done, lads,' Cassodorus said encouragingly, as the three stretched and massaged aching muscles. 'Just another few cubits and we're there!' Amongst his peers, Cassodorus was known as

'Cassodorus the Rat', due to his undoubted resemblance to that hardy rodent. It was especially noticeable when he smiled, as he did now.

He had the appropriate teeth; all he lacked, apparently, were the whiskers.

'You've been saying that for the last five days!' exclaimed Decius, pulling off his heavy gloves and examining his fingers carefully. His regular work required a certain lightness of touch combining a sharp blade and the cords of money pouches. He was anxious not to develop blisters. 'Months we've been at this, and I don't think you've any idea how far there's left to go.'

'Might come out in the middle of the Forum,' rumbled Strabo, chuckling at his simple humour. He caught sight of Cassodorus's expression and shrank like a chastened boy 'Sorry, Cass,' he mumbled.

Tiro opened up a new line of dissent. 'And what about equal time up the shaft, eh? Don't see you up there very often. No, you like to keep cosy out here doing the light work.'

It was an effort, but Cassodorus assumed the demeanour of a good man misunderstood. 'Lads, I'm shocked, I really am. Do you think it's easy stoking and oiling that hot engine all day? And if the guard should find this end of the tunnel, who would they meet first? Who would have to hold them at bay, sacrificing himself while the others got away?'

'Who would be the first to turn the rest in so he could save his own skin?' continued Decius. 'Anyway, there's only one way out, so where would we be escaping to?'

'Ah, all the more reason to get the shaft finished then, isn't it?'

Cassodorus pointed out, then continued before the rest had a chance to think: 'After all who set all this up? Who is planning the greatest robbery this city has ever seen, and, out of the goodness of his heart, has offered you a percentage — .'

'Equal shares,' muttered Strabo.

'Same thing,' said Cassodorus quickly.

'Better be,' Tiro added, menacingly. 'While we're about it, who paid for most of the tools? Decius here — well, his purses, anyway. And who stole the engine? I did!'

'I carried it in bits,' Strabo said proudly.

'All right,' exclaimed Cassodorus, waving his hands in a placating gesture. 'Everybody's put in something. But you remember just who it was who found out where they'd filled in with rubble instead of

proper masonry? And who found this house? And, who drew up The Plan?' He pulled the familiar, grubby, much-folded sheet of parchment from an inner recess of his tunic, and proudly shook it open. It was covered with scratchily drawn plan views and sections through one particular building, overlain with a web of sight lines, bearings and angles. Here and there were blocks of figures and complicated-looking calculations. Some of these were actually necessary, the rest he had added for effect.

Cassodorus's tone became hushed, as though awed by his own words. 'That's it, feast your eyes, lads. That's the path to riches marked out there — riches beyond your wildest dreams. You can retire on this and live in a palace as big as Alexander's, and stuff it with dancing girls and slaves, and you can eat off gold plates and you won't have to lift a finger for yourself ever again. No more thieving and dodging the watch and living in stinking rooms, and thinking any moment it'll be the knife in the ribs and a quick trip to the bottom of the Tiber because someone's crossed you. Life would be one long Bacchanalia, and all it needs is for you to dig just a few more small chunks of rock.'

There was a thoughtful silence filled by imaginations briefly unchained. Then the others exchanged shamefaced glances. Put like that, it seemed foolish to complain about a little bit of digging.

It was very dark. The slow, booming voice seemed to be talking to itself: 'sky turn ... sun goes down. Stars come out ... turn slowly.

Moon rises ... now quarter size. Clouds come from the ... west. Winds blow and rain falls. Stars fade. New day ... sun rises — oh! You come back! Long time you no speak to me. Thought you'd left me!

Promised me never alone again!'

'Yes I know,' replied the cool, commanding voice sharply. 'That was not my fault; that was *your* clumsiness. Do that again and I will leave you alone forever. Do you understand?'

'No leave me — .'

'Not if you obey. Now, show me what you have done. Have you ...

read anything else?'

'No. Told you. Can only read once. But been keeping busy. Look, look, me show you.'

After they had bathed and dressed the Queen, her slaves attended to her make-up. A white base was applied to her face and arms, to keep them attractively pale. Her lips were painted and a little colour rubbed onto her cheeks. Aquamarine powder shaded her eyes, which were then outlined and highlighted with antimony and kohl. When they were done, Cleopatra Selene dismissed them and stood alone before the big, full-length mirror in her dressing room.

She always did this before an important social or political meeting.

She wanted to look at herself without distractions, to see herself as others, especially men, would see her. It was not vanity — her mother had taught her that — it was simply the natural way of things. One used whatever tools were available to achieve a purpose. Physical appearance was one of those tools, one which was effective against men in particular. Had not her mother proved this at least twice? She smiled to herself. The delight was that, try as they might, beauty almost always blinded them to what lay underneath. However much they might believe they could look beneath the skin, they always found it hard to accept that an intellect superior to theirs might be concealed within an attractive exterior. At best, they might think they had discovered some shallow subterfuge and congratulate themselves on their success at not being deceived by beauty. Too late, of course, they would discover that they had not looked deep enough.

Intelligence, beauty and power. All three could coexist together.

She was proof of that.

So, Cleopatra Selene, Child of the Gods, Queen of the Nile, Ruler of the Eastern Realm of the Dominion, examined her reflection critically, as a good workman might a tool she was about to employ.

Representatives of the provinces of Cyrenaica and Numidia were seeking audiences with her today, so she was dressed in a traditional Egyptian style which she had fashioned to suit her purposes.

Crowning everything was an intricately beaded vulture head-dress, shot through with gold thread. Over her shoulders was a broad collar of precious stones. Below that she wore a long, tight-fitting dress of finest, almost translucent linen, belted with a golden sash. Jewellery, in the form of finely wrought bracelets, anklets and rings completed the ensemble.

Yes, she decided, turning to one side then the other, the effect was suitable for her particular guests. Had they been from the Aegean

lands, she would have modified her costume slightly in the Greek style, to remind them of her dynasty's links with Alexander the Great.

Had they been from Rome, she would have worn a dress cut and trimmed in that style. Romans preferred ostentation in their own manner, and, for the moment, she flattered their ideas of suitable costume which reflected their lingering Republican ideals. She was acknowledged freely as Queen only by the Eastern Realm, as had her mother before her. It had perhaps been her parents' hardest, but wisest, decision not to force their claim to divine power on Rome.

Marcus Antonius had been elected permanent Consul of Rome, taken the ancient title of Praetor and been made Dictator for life — but never Emperor. Rome had not been ready for divine rule by the husband of the Queen of the Nile twenty years before. Now, her daughter was effectively a triumvir of a far larger Dominion. But she still wanted the prize her mother never had. After all, it was her destiny. Soon, she thought. Soon.

In its way, the mirror before her was symbolic of impending change, thought Selene. It had been made using knowledge of the drawing and silvering of sheet glass revealed to them by the Oracle.

Daily, she delighted in its honest, perfect reflection, so superior to the small, polished copper mirrors she used when she was young.

She paused, frowning, then leaned forward curiously, examining the ornate frame of the mirror. There was something slightly different about it which she could not quite name. She touched the frame and became aware of the faintest of tingling sensations —

A slim, strong, disembodied hand reached out of the mirror surface and clasped her wrist.

Cleopatra Selene had time for only the briefest yelp of shocked horror, before she was pulled through the face of the mirror and vanished from the room. For a moment, the mirror shimmered like a pool of quicksilver, then it became still once more.

V

The water droplet gathered speed again and splashed onto the collar of the Doctor's coat, which Peri held wrapped about her.

The time rotor shuddered into life once more. Console lights flickered dimly on.

'... t h e o t h e r a d j u s t s t o c o m pensate,' concluded the Doctor, his voice returning to its usual tone.

A dull, solid, thump reverberated through the TARDIS, like the distant sound of a lead slab hitting the ground.

They had landed.

Peri blinked and looked about her in puzzlement. Superficially, it seemed as though the power had flickered off for a second or two, then come on again. But somewhere deep inside, a sixth sense was insisting that the 'moment' had actually lasted for years. She shook her head gingerly, hoping that everything would make sense again soon, and reminding herself that if she had wanted an ordinary life, she wouldn't be here.

'Ah, good,' said the Doctor, as though everything was perfectly normal. He stood up and went over to the console, where he began to study the few scattered readings that were showing on the displays.

Peri struggled upright within the enveloping folds of his borrowed coat and followed him, her bare feet slapping over the still wet floor.

The Doctor circled the console, studying the controls and cautiously adjusting settings. After a minute of this, Peri commented brightly:

'I'm glad we've got some light in here again. Does this mean the rest of the power will be back on line soon?'

'Unfortunately not. This is just the last of the residual force field energy that has been re-absorbed into the system,' the Doctor replied, still circling busily.

'So what about the link with the Eye of Harmony?'

'That's still broken.'

'Can't you fix it?'

'Oddly enough,' the Doctor responded, with heavy sarcasm, 'that is what I am trying to do.' He stood back from the controls and scratched his head for a moment, looking frankly perplexed.

'However, the beam is not there to be locked on to!'

'I thought you said it could be picked up anywhere in time and space?'

'It can.'

'So?'

'So, either this is somewhere outside the normal continuum, or else the beam is being blocked. I'm detecting some peculiar faint energy readings, but with the low power the receptor sensitivity is not what I would wish, so I can't make a detailed analysis.' His brow furrowed in deep thought once more.

'Things don't work too good without that beam, do they Doctor?'

Peri commented, disturbing his reverie.

'Hmm? Ah, no. No, the link to the Eye of Harmony was the Time Lord discovery that made widespread time travel safe and controllable. It supplies not only power, but the equivalent of a fixed reference point, both physically and temporally, for calibration purposes. It allows a TARDIS to determine its location with tremendous precision — .'

'But have you any idea where *we* are *now*? I mean, we have landed *somewhere*, haven't we?'

'Yes, we have definitely landed somewhere.'

'Well, don't keep it a state secret, Doctor!'

The Doctor looked annoyed, unwilling to admit he was unsure of the facts. 'Allowing for the interference with the systems we sustained and the low power, the navigation readings do indicate that we almost completed our planned journey.'

'How do you mean?'

'We are in Rome, but only in the year ten BC, approximately.'

'Well, at least that's somewhere, Doctor.'

'Yes, but that doesn't explain why I can't detect the Eye of Harmony link, or the origin of the trace energy field. Something is definitely wrong here,' he concluded.

Peri smiled wryly and shrugged, as expressively as she could within the bulky coat. 'So what's new? I should've known better than to expect two trips in a row to work out okay.' She appeared to have recovered her resolve. 'Okay, let's get outside and take a look-see. It'll be nice to get into the light again.'

'I'm afraid there is no light outside,' replied the Doctor, turning on the main scanner. The screen came to life but showed only blackness.

'We appear to have materialized inside an enclosed space; some sort of building, I assume. For the moment, however, it seems to be deserted.'

'We're going to need some flashlights, then' She peered around the gloomy interior. 'Could do with some more light in here while we're about it.'

'The emergency lamps are behind the third roundel up, on the left of the column beside the sea-chest,' the Doctor informed her absently, returning to his examination of the control console.

The roundel swung open to reveal deep shelves holding an antique oil lamp, three hurricane lamps, two miners' Davy lamps, four camper's gas-fuelled lights and several electric torches, of more or less conventional appearance. Peri switched on one of the torches to test it. 'Say, Doctor, I wish you'd have told me these were here earlier.

Hey, what's this?' Amongst the clutter, Peri had discovered a box containing what appeared to be a dozen fist-sized blobs of cloudy plastic jelly, which were soft and malleable to the touch.

The Doctor glanced over briefly. 'Oh, yes: synthetic bioluminescents. Mould one in your hand for a minute.'

Peri worked one of the blobs, feeling it grow warm in her hand.

Within moments it started to glow with a pale, green tinted radiance.

Peri was entranced by the effect, momentarily forgetting their situation. The blobs were slightly tacky, sticking to the wall, but peeling off again easily. A little experimentation revealed they could be shaped like modelling clay, and she quickly made a glowing circlet to wear on her head. She laughed. 'See, Doctor: very practical

— needs no hands! Bet these would make great kids' toys as well.'

'They *are* children's toys, about thirty years on from your time. No if you have quite finished playing, we'll see what is outside, shall we?'

'Wait for me, I've just got to find some clothes.' Taking a torch and a couple of the glow-blobs, which she planned to put up to illuminate the way, she splashed out into the corridor.

'Do please try not to get my coat wet,' the Doctor called plaintively after her.

'Doctor, anything that happens to this coat can only be an improvement!'

Peri was back in a few minutes wearing a shirt, shorts and practical stout ankle boots. She was carrying the Doctor's coat with elaborate care to keep it clear of any splashes. The corridor was still awash, and she reflected that it' would take a good deal of mop-and-bucket work to clean it up if they could not get the TARDIS's automatic maintenance systems powered up soon. She found the Doctor was laboriously turning a crank handle inserted in a small socket beside the doors, which were slowly swinging open. Peri could only see blackness beyond.

When they were wide enough, she handed him his coat and a torch.

The Doctor squeezed between the doors and Peri followed close behind.

The air outside was cool and still and slightly musty. It was totally silent except for the sound of their own movements, and the scrape of their boots on the stone floor seemed harsh and intrusive. Peri shivered, feeling as though their presence was resented in some way.

She swung her torch around, probing the darkness with its beam. The TARDIS seemed to have materialized inside a spacious chamber, built of close-fitting stonework, which she estimated to be perhaps four yards high, by ten long and five wide. The dancing circle of her torch beam revealed flashes of colour; a broad frieze was painted on the walls between knee and head height, comprised of figure groups in Roman and Egyptian dress set in various tableaux. Between them were blocks of text in Latin and Greek, interspersed with some Egyptian hieroglyphs. In the middle of one of the chamber's long walls was a massive double door, but without any sign of a handle.

Was that the only door? she wondered, swinging her torch around.

'Yike!' Her involuntary exclamation of surprise echoed around the chamber. Beside a second doorway stood the silent guardian figure of a woman in a golden dress carrying a rod and mace.

At her yell, the Doctor's torch had also turned to illuminate the motionless figure. 'What beautiful workmanship,' he observed, with infuriating composure. His torch beam revealed a second figure,

seemingly identical to the first, on the other side of the doorway.

Peri recovered herself. 'Gee, Doctor. How was I supposed to know it was a statue? It looks so real. It's the atmosphere in here. This place is as spooky as a — .'

'Tomb?' suggested the Doctor. 'Perhaps that is because it *is* a tomb.'

'Huh?'

'At least, the antechamber of a tomb,' he explained, playing his torch over the frieze as he circled the chamber, examining the pictures and text intently. 'This appears to be a record of the life and triumphs of its occupant.'

'Oh. And who's that?'

'Apparently, Cleopatra, Queen of the Nile.'

'Hey! Cleopatra's own tomb,' Peri said, slightly awed, unconsciously lowering her voice to a respectful whisper.

'And these are representations of the lady herself,' said the Doctor, indicating the twin statues, 'symbolically guarding the entrance to the inner chambers, and her own last resting place.' They were beautifully carved and black lacquered, with the costume and head-dress being picked out in gilt. The two doors they guarded were intricately patterned and inlaid. Tied between the large handle of each door was a heavy twisted rope, fused into place with wax and clay seals.

Peri shivered slightly. 'Some place for us to land, isn't it? But I didn't know Cleopatra was buried in Rome.'

'She wasn't,' the Doctor replied. In the reflected torchlight, Peri saw his features had taken on an unusually grim set. 'Look at this next wall beside the door.'

The pictures portrayed a series of celebrations and grand processions. It was a summary of the life and triumphs of Cleopatra and her consort. The pictorial style of the work was a composite of the symbolic and naturalistic, and Peri found some of the distortions of perspective and relative sizes of people according to rank confusing. One factor, though, soon became abundantly clear.

'Some of these more recent things never happened in *my* past, did they, Doctor?' she said hesitantly.

'No, they didn't. Look at the dates of these events.'

'Uh ... they've got some decimal numerals as well as Roman; that's not right. What's AUC mean?'

'Roman dating: *ab urbe condita* — "From the Foundation of the City". In your terms, the traditional date of the foundation of Rome was seven hundred and fifty— three BC.'

Peri was working her way along the wall, adjusting dates in her mind. 'Hey, what's this big sea battle in, uh, thirty—one BC? Are these meant to be *steam* ships?'

'Unfortunately, I think they are.'

'Thirty—one BC seems familiar ...'

'The decisive sea battle of Actium. The forces of Antony and Cleopatra lost. By the next year, they were both dead and Octavian was on his way to becoming Emperor Augustus.'

Not here, though.' Peri continued along the frieze. 'Look, in seven twenty—five AUC, uh, twenty—nine BC, they seem to have changed the calendar.'

'So they have,' confirmed the Doctor. ' "Dominion Year One," it says.'

'Here's Antony's funeral, I guess, in thirteen DY,' continued Peri,

'and Cleopatra's in fifteen DY ... and there it ends' She turned away from the wall, her expression deeply troubled. 'Doctor, just where are we?'

VI

The first long rays of morning sunlight spread over the broad plain of sand and rock that lay to the south-west of Alexandria. The tapering lattice-work of the sturdy mooring masts caught it first, glowing ruddily against the still dusky sky. Then the arching roofs of the giant hangars were illuminated; the light creeping down their massive, buttressed, mudbrick side walls, and across the great double doors that closed their ends.

Teams of loincloth-clad workers appeared, shivering in the chill air, marching in files from their dormitory compounds set on the edge of the plain. Some of the teams dispersed to the ranks of solar boilers

that ringed the perimeter of the complex, tilting the long parabolic mirrors of polished metal to face the morning sun, and checking the pipework that connected the arrays to the turbine generators. Another group, after being given their daily dispensation by the priest-technicians, entered the enclosure of the Electrolysis Temple. There, within an inner sanctum, the priests would perform the mysterious rites that transformed the water, channelled into the temple by the canal cut across the plain, into the wonderful, but dangerous, lifting gas.

A third team was marched to the largest of the great hangars that dominated the centre of the plain. At their overseer's command, they rolled aside the towering double doors, constructed of laminated wood frames panelled with lattice-work reed mats. In two files, the men entered the cavernous interior. Anxiously, the overseer checked the wind, but the morning air was almost still, with only the lightest of seaward breezes. The men emerged, pulling on lines hanging from above. Slowly, majestically, the pale, seven hundred and fifty metre length of the airship *Horus* was drawn out into the morning light. On its nose, emblazoned in gold and blue, was the symbol of winged sun and eye. Its tail fins too were shaped and painted to resemble the wings of birds.

Carefully, the weightless mass of the hundred and eighty ton craft was walked over to its mooring tower and secured by its nose mount, allowing it, if needed, to turn freely into the wind. Then the final preparations were begun for the *Horus* to receive its royal passenger.

The morning sun was still touching the lotus bud capitals of the throne room columns, as Cleopatra Selene held a last audience with her ministers before departing for Rome. In order of seniority they sat on the broad, curving steps of the dais, below the level of her magnificently canopied throne. Below them were their various scribes and recorders, writing boards balanced on their knees, noting the Queen's directions for the administration of the realm during her absence.

At length the audience was completed. One by one, the men bowed their way out of her presence, but the Queen signalled to Chief Minister Xanthes that he should remain behind. Once the others had left, she descended from her throne.

'Walk with me, Xanthes. I wish to speak in private,' she directed.

They passed out into a long corridor decorated with a fresco of white

ibis feeding by a poolside. At the end of the passage was a doorway flanked by two of the palace guard, who opened the door and bowed them through. Beyond was a high-walled, secluded garden, shaded by sycamore and acacia trees, its grass still wet with dew. Bees buzzed soothingly amongst the profuse and colourful flowers.

The garden door was closed behind them.

'Is all ready?' enquired the Queen.

'Yes, Your Majesty. The carriers and surface fleet report all is well.

They await only your orders to sail, should that be necessary.'

Cleopatra Selene faced him squarely, her dark eyes sharp and probing. Xanthes found it hard to meet her gaze, thinking she had become even more imperious of late.

'You do not approve of the course I have chosen,' she said. It was a statement, not a question, but there seemed to him to be a coldly detached sense of curiosity behind it.

'It is not for me to approve or disapprove, Majesty, simply to carry out your wishes to the best of my ability.' He paused. 'However, if asked for counsel on the matter, I would advise that every effort be made to avoid war. The Dominion cannot afford to be torn apart by civil strife as was the Republic before it — .'

'Out of which strife my parents won through to supreme power,'

Cleopatra Selene reminded him.

'A blessed outcome,' Xanthes asserted hastily. 'But surely not to be thought a recommendation for another war. Reconsider, Majesty, if not to avoid the waste conflict brings, then to avoid the risk, the possibility, of failure — .'

'Failure!' Cleopatra Selene's eyes burned. 'There is no chance of that! Though you are correct in fearing division, Xanthes, you do not seem to realize that the Dominion is already divided — between Alexander, Ptolemy and myself. That is not natural or desirable. If we three were of equal capabilities then perhaps some compromise might be found.' Her fine features twisted into a sneer. 'But that is hardly the case. My brother is not competent and my half-brother has lost his nerve. It is left to me to take ultimate responsibility. My success will be proof of my divine right to rule' She threw out her arms, fists clenched, as

though grasping something intangible. Xanthes shrank away from her, recoiling from the naked force of her desire. She regarded him with amused contempt. 'Your trouble, Xanthes, is that you have no ambition left in you.'

The old man bowed his head, leaning heavily on his staff of office for the first time. 'No, Your Majesty,' he said quietly, 'I think perhaps I am simply tired. Maybe selfishly, I had hoped to spend my last years at peace.'

They had reached a gate in the garden wall. Cleopatra Selene opened it before Xanthes could do so for her. 'Do you doubt I will succeed?' she asked.

'I have never had any doubt of your abilities, Majesty,' he responded simply, 'otherwise ...' He bit back his next words. She smiled knowingly, and Xanthes suddenly looked anxious.

Beyond the gate was a flight of steps leading up to a sweep of colonnaded walkway surrounding a low walled enclosure. There was a rank smell in the air, and the sound of intermittent splashing of water could be heard. As they mounted the steps and approached the low wall, a massive figure moved silently into the shadows behind a column.

The wall enclosed a large sunken pool, part filled with rocks and green-scummed water. Sprawled on the rocks or floating almost unseen like submerged logs, were half a dozen full-grown Nile crocodiles. Set ready on the top of the wall was a pair of tongs and a golden platter, piled with chunks of fresh raw meat. Cleopatra Selene picked up a piece of meat and tossed it into the pool. One of the great beasts snapped at the titbit, whilst the rest stirred lazily, still sluggish from the cool of the night, voicing a ragged chorus of coughing grunts. The Queen threw in another chunk. A basking crocodile rose stiffly on its outsplayed legs and waddled forward into the water after it. Xanthes watched the display tight-lipped.

'How is the work on the new wireless transmitting devices progressing?' she asked, seeming to turn to a new matter.

Xanthes looked relieved. 'They are going well,' he responded calmly.

'And how far have they been able to send signals?'

'I am not sure exactly, Majesty. I will enquire.'

'In general, then. Can they reach Athens yet? Or Carthage? Or Rome?' She was watching his face intently as she spoke those apparently trivial words. Xanthes suddenly blanched.

'I just wondered if you had been communicating with my brother recently. But perhaps you were keeping it from me to save as a surprise?' Her manner was light and innocent, but it was at that moment that Xanthes realized how closely her smile resembled those of the creatures in the pool below.

Xanthes stuttered: 'I ... I did it to save the Dominion, Majesty —

you must believe that!'

'So Alexander knows all my plans?' Her voice was calm, almost expectant.

'Only to counter them without conflict, Majesty. He promised.

Your brother wants peace between you, so you can seek some better way ...' He was trembling now.

'But have you told him everything?' Her voice was like steel.

Xanthes seemed to crumble before her. 'Yes, he whimpered wretchedly.

'Everything up to the directions I made yesterday?'

Xanthes could only nod dumbly.

'Good!' she said simply. Xanthes stared at her aghast. 'You are a naive old fool, Xanthes, as I am sure even my brother would agree, but you have your uses.' Unseen by him, she made a quick gesture with her fingers.

Even as Xanthes stood there in a daze, trying to take in what had happened, a huge hand clamped over his mouth, jerking back his head. A brawny arm caught him about the thighs and he was lifted into the air like a child and lightly tossed over the wall of the crocodile pool.

There was time for just one piercing cry of horror before all was lost in the thrashing and churning of water. Cleopatra Selene leaned eagerly over the parapet and watched, devouring every detail, her face alive with rapt fascination.

By the time the guards arrived in response to the cry, it was all over. The Queen stood by the pool alone, holding Xanthes's staff in her hand, her face expressionless. 'The First Minister overbalanced and fell into the pool,' she explained. 'It is a great tragedy to lose such a loyal subject. Captain Fabio,' she addressed the chief of the Palace guard, who was looking suspiciously about him at the surround of the pool. He snapped to attention at her words. 'This is a most inauspicious event. Indeed, it may be an omen from the Gods. I must seek the advice of Kharmon at once.'

'But not without an escort, Majesty,' he said quickly. He saw a brief smile touch her lips.

'Thank you for your concern, Fabio,' she said warmly. 'I always know when I may count on you. There is another service I require.'

'Anything, Majesty.'

'This may be a sign that I should not travel today, but other factors may require that I depart as planned. I want you personally to go to the airfield and see that my ship is ready for flight, and that all possible precautions have been taken to ensure a safe journey. Do you understand?'

'Perfectly, Majesty.' Crisply, he detailed two men to escort the Queen to the apartments of the Priest of Serapis, then set about his own task. There was a notable eagerness in his manner as he left for the airfield.

Dawn came to Rome an hour later than Alexandria.

As the grey light coloured into pink, Ptolemy Caesar awoke and rose from a traditional bed of leather strap frame and straw mattress.

For a few minutes he stretched and twisted, briskly, exercising his muscles. He might be thirty-seven, and his hair receding a little, but he worked hard at remaining lean and supple. If he could find time today, perhaps after visiting Agricola, he would visit the gymnasia and exercise properly, perhaps find someone to spar with. Certainly, if he did not manage it today, there would be no chance tomorrow.

His toilet was simply performed by splashing cold water from a basin over his hands and face, and combing his hair. Later, a slave would shave him, and he would attend the baths for a new 'soap wash', which was becoming popular. He pulled on a tunic and sandals and left his spartan bedroom.

The corridor beyond looked out on a peaceful colonnaded garden courtyard, holding a fishpond and a few carefully tended plots and bushes. Though set on the fashionable Palatine Hill, and commonly referred to as his palace, Ptolemy Caesar's dwelling was relatively modest, enclosing only two such inner courtyard gardens and the small enclosure feeding the old *impluvium* rainwater basin. The latter was now rendered purely decorative by the improved piped water running directly to the kitchens.

Reaching his study room, Ptolemy found the usual small platter of bread, honey and cold meat ready for him. He chewed on this light breakfast as he read over his correspondence, which his secretary servant Dimetrios had laid out on the table for him. Most were routine administrative notices, together with a handful of petitions from senators requesting his assistance on behalf of their clients, but one bearing Alexander's seal caught his eye. He broke it open and unfolded the sheet, noting as he did that Alexander had now taken to having his new paper stationery tinted in fanciful colours.

The message was brief and superficially trivial, but its true significance did not escape him. He cast the letter aside. So, they wanted his declaration of support today. But they must know he would never give it, so what then? Dark times either way. But did he care any more?

He went over to a small alcove set in one wall of his study. It held the *lararium*, the chapel for gods of the household. Enclosed by a miniature temple portico were images of Vesta, goddess of the hearth, and Janus, watcher of the door. Between them was the Egyptian bull god, Serapis, his family deity. Above it was the symbol of the Oracle. Hung about the shrine, as they did in many Roman homes, were three other images, also deified in some eyes. They showed his father, mother and Marcus Antonius.

He stared at their faces for a long time. My ancestors, he thought, how do you counsel me now? Forgive me for thinking thus, but sometimes I wish the Oracle had never been sent to us.

Kharmon, Chief Priest of Serapis, greeted Cleopatra Selene with suitably grave words.

'A great loss to this earthly plain of mud and decay, Majesty,' he intoned solemnly. Tut Xanthes's spirit shall soon depart upon its journey to eternal life as companion to the gods.'

The door closed leaving the Queen's escort outside. Once they were safe from being overheard, Kharmon's manner changed.

'It was necessary, Majesty. Destiny could not be denied' His small, dark eyes gave no indication of regret.

Kharmon's audience chamber was dominated by a statue of Serapis in bull-form, whilst set in mosaic on the floor was a representation of the Oracle itself. Kharmon himself was already dressed in his ceremonial leopard skin and long pleated skirt.

'Of course it was necessary,' agreed Cleopatra Selene briskly. 'He would have ruined everything with his talk of compromise.' She was still holding Xanthes's staff of office. Now she handed it to Kharmon.

'Continue sending the regular reports to Rome in his manner; they must suspect nothing is amiss. You understand how to use this?' The priest twisted the head of the staff and pulled. A metal sleeve slid up to reveal the finely engraved letters of the enciphering rings beneath.

He smiled in cold satisfaction and nodded. 'Good. Now, what of the carriers and the surface fleet?'

'I am certain Xanthes never learned you had personally ordered the surface fleet to sail three days ago, Majesty. All reports of this were relayed through my offices, and false reports sent on to Xanthes's administrators. As to the carriers, they will be ready to follow one day behind your craft, as planned. Your instructions have been relayed to all the most senior and trustworthy commanders by my agents.'

Cleopatra Selene smiled. 'Then all is going as it should. There is one other minor detail to take care of, but after that, in three days, Rome will be mine and the Dominion shall have the ruler it deserves!'

'Of course, Majesty. It has been foretold by all the signs. When our hearts are weighed after death, as the Book of the Dead tells they will, we must be able to say this thing was done. The Oracle must be returned forever to its proper resting place.'

For just a moment, a curiously knowing smile flashed across Cleopatra Selene's lips. 'Kharmon,' she said sincerely, 'you can have no idea how strongly I also wish to see the Oracle in its *proper* place.'

'Dictator, your pardon for disturbing you. Dictator Alexander?'

There was no response.

Prefect Markus Vitellius looked around him at the palace bedchamber with carefully concealed displeasure. It was furnished in the new style, which borrowed much from the Persian and Egyptian.

The walls were obscured by highly coloured hangings, which dropped in graceful folds from the intricately moulded cornices.

Thickly tufted circular rugs were scattered across the floor like islands on a sea of marble. A small hill of cushions were piled in one corner between two highly detailed — if rather over-endowed — life-size nude statues, which served as lamp holders.

Vitellius cleared his throat again, a little louder, and repeated himself, directing his words more forcefully at the large, canopied and veiled bed which sat imposingly on its raised dais against one wall. This time there came a muffled grunt, which he took to be an invitation to approach closer. Behind the gauzy veils, a bed-sheet swathed bundle resolved itself into two forms. One rolled to the side of the wide bed, and lazily extended a long, brown shapely leg over the side. The second hauled itself up from under the sheets and onto the silk bolster, revealing the head and shoulders of a young man with curled and tousled hair. He blinked blearily at Vitellius in vague annoyance.

'Why are you disturbing me at this hour, Vitellius?' He covered his eyes as though in pain. 'Curse the light — who opened those curtains?

Don't you know it feels like Vulcan has set up his forge inside my head?'

Silently, Vitellius poured water from the jug on a side table, noting the empty wine vessels and spilled goblets as he did, and guided Alexander Helios's searching hand to the cup. He drank gratefully, and a little colour returned to his face. He focused on Vitellius with red-rimmed eyes. 'Now, what is so important that you disturb me at ...

What is the hour?'

'The second past dawn, Dictator,' Vitellius admitted blandly.

'Why, that's hardly any time at all. What is so important that you disturb my rest?'

'You did ask me to inform you last night.'

'Well, out with it then.'

'An affair of State, Dictator. We are not alone ...' He nodded significantly at the other occupant of the bed.

'Eh? Oh, yes' Alexander reached out and slapped a swelling curve of the bedclothes crisply, eliciting a squeal of surprise. 'Away with you, girl! We wish to speak in private' A beautiful, dusky Numidian woman, with a mass of raven-black curling hair, rolled out of the other side of the bed. For a moment she glowered resentfully at Vitellius, then her teeth flashed in an amused grin. With slow deliberation, she wrapped a sheet about her and slunk provocatively past him and out of the room.

'Do you disapprove, Vitellius?' asked Alexander. 'She really is most skilled. I'd recommend you to try her, but I'm keeping her for myself.' He chuckled then clutched his head again.

'I do not disapprove of her in particular, Dictator. Her charms are self-evident. But one in your position and of your age should — .'

'I know! Take a respectable wife because the people expect it. You have pestered me with the names of suitable Roman women of good family, or the princesses of subject lands. But you know the thought of being tied, even in name only, to just one woman, appals me. Why, my illustrious namesake of old had concubines by the score — and they called him "The Great". Do they not realize I am not to be bound by the limitations imposed on ordinary men? When will they realize the fact of my lineage?'

'Soon, Dictator, soon. When the signs are right. Until then, you must at least appear to conform to convention.'

'That is what you always say,' complained Alexander peevishly.

'Oh, never mind. I suppose I must be blessed with divine patience so I will survive. As long as I have a few about me who acknowledge the truth, like yourself.' He favoured Vitellius with a benevolent smile.

'You're a great comfort to me, Vitellius — even though you do come perilously close to annoying me at times. All right, what is this matter of State that is so important?'

Vitellius handed him a coded message slip with its plain text translation. 'A communication received last night from Xanthes, Dictator. It reveals the final disposition of your sister's forces before her departure this morning.' Alexander studied the contents with interest. 'As you will see, there are no immediate plans for either her

surface or air forces to take up any position which might threaten us.

She should arrive tomorrow with only her expected escort.'

'Yes, I see. This is good, Vitellius. We've no need to recall any legions from the provinces for the moment, then. Xanthes must still be keeping her in check. Well, all preparations can proceed as normal for her reception.'

'And the matter of Ptolemy Caesar, Dictator?'

'Ah, yes. Dear Caesarion. That must be resolved soon, one way or another.' He rubbed his hands briskly. 'I can see today is going to be busy. I shall rise,' he announced, throwing back the bedclothes. 'Ring the bell for my attendants.' Alexander swung his legs over the side of the bed and paused, thoughtfully. 'Of course, we know Selene has been plotting against me, has she not, Vitellius?'

'Regrettably, she has, Dictator.'

'Hardly something I can be expected to pardon?'

'No, Dictator.'

'Of course, it would be simpler if she never arrived at all. Accidents do happen, don't they?'

'They do indeed, Dictator ...'

Cleopatra Selene's state carriage drew up beneath the swelling bulk of the *Horus*. The airship was now tethered close to the ground, and a wheeled stairway had been positioned to give access to its main hatchway. Fabio was waiting for her and saluted as she alighted. 'All supplies and crew are aboard, Majesty,' he reported smartly. Then he leaned slightly closer, lowering his voice. 'And I have checked everything personally, as you requested,' he confirmed.

'Trusted Fabio. You have done much to reassure me' She appeared to pause for thought. 'In fact, I think I will take you with me; then I'll have nothing to fear, will I?'

Fabio's jaw dropped, and he appeared to sway on his feet. 'Me, Majesty? But I have duties — .'

'Your first duty is to me, Fabio, is it not?'

'Of course, Majesty ... but I ... '

'Surely you are not afraid of flying? I have heard even the bravest of men are afflicted by such fears.'

'N-no, Majesty.'

Then come along. We must get under way.'

Cleopatra Selene climbed the stairway with regal dignity. Fabio followed on behind with tottering steps, his face a mask of blank disbelief.

VII

The double doors leading to the next section of the tomb swung open with an appropriately deep and querulous creaking groan.

'I really wish they hadn't done that,' Peri commented nervously.

Images from any number of horror films kept popping into her thoughts, reminding her of the traditional fate reserved for tomb robbers — or even those like themselves, who were merely passing through, as it were.

The Doctor sighed. 'I trust you are not going to continue to jump at every shadow.'

'Okay, Doctor, don't rub it in.'

The doors opened onto a broad flight of stairs, leading up into the darkness. They ascended cautiously until they reached another set of doors, which were closed but not sealed. These opened almost silently, compared to the first set, revealing a larger space beyond.

Peri swung her torch about the interior of the new chamber. 'Wow —

jackpot!' she exclaimed.

The room was circular, perhaps twenty yards across, with a coffered, hemispherical roof vault, some eight or nine yards at its highest. From the chamber's contents, there was no doubt of its function. In every item her torch beam touched Peri seemed to see the answering flicker of gold, the pale glow of alabaster or the contrast of ivory inlaid on ebony. There were statues, figurines, gilded pots and jars, decorated caskets and chests of all sizes, highly ornamented chairs, couches and stools. Some of the furniture incorporated stylized animal heads embodied in their frameworks or as decorations, and Peri found the

jewelled eyes of caricatured lions, hippopotami and crocodiles twinkling back at her from the confusion of riches.

She wandered entranced down an aisle between the stacks of priceless relics until she came to a clear space in the very centre of the room, which was marked by a concentric pattern set in mosaic on the floor. Here she turned around, dizzy with the sensation of discovery. She was surrounded by the most fabulous collection of ancient funerary goods she had ever seen. This was how Howard Carter must have felt entering Tutankamen's tomb, she thought, except that Tutankamen's tomb was a garden shed by comparison.

History in the making, the splendour of the ancient world. Then her sense of perspective caught up with her. This was not history. The Queen in whose honour all this had been assembled had only died a few years ago. Most of the artists and craftsmen who had fashioned these exquisite things were probably still alive, in the here-and-now she was presently occupying. She sighed, feeling confused. The Doctor kept saying that everything was relative, and the TARDIS

certainly proved it. But did it make her surroundings any less wonderful to know that, metaphorically speaking, the paint was still wet around the edges?

She looked about her again, noting a second aisle winding between the stacks of treasure. 'Hey, Doctor,' she called out. 'There's another of those fancy doors here with the rope seals and so on. Wonder where it goes to?'

'Probably to the sarcophagus chamber itself, I would think.'

'Oh. Well, we'll leave that be, then!

'Look at this,' said the Doctor. He had also been examining the treasure whilst she had been lost in her thoughts. Now he was shining his torch on one particular item. Peri crossed over to him and brought her own torch to bear. A sense of *déjà vu* assailed her.

It was an exquisitely detailed model of Cleopatra's royal barge, which, from Peri's point of view, she had been photographing on the Nile only an hour before. But it was a model with striking differences. Gone were the banks of oars and the long steering paddles. Instead there were twin paddle-wheels and a sternpost rudder. From the deck rose a tall funnel.

'I guess there's no doubt about it,' said Peri. 'We have definitely slipped

sideways in time, into one of those parallel worlds you told me about.'

The Doctor's face was contorted into an intense scowl of concentrated thought. 'It would seem so, and yet, I'm not certain.'

'Awh, come on, Doctor, what else can it be?'

'There should have been some indication on the console readings

— .'

'After the way they've been knocked about, and with the low power and all?'

'Perhaps, perhaps,' the Doctor mused. 'I suppose we shall simply have to explore beyond this tomb and discover what lies outside.'

'The good old empirical method,' Peri chipped in.

'We assume it is Rome,' continued the Doctor, 'but what version of Rome will it be, if we have truly entered a parallel time—line?' He raised an expressive, quizzical eyebrow at her.

'Well, let's get out there and find out, huh? The suspense is killing me! She turned towards the door they had come through.

'No, not that way. Look at the roof.'

Puzzled, Peri pointed her torch upwards. Amongst the radiating ribs and recessed panels that formed the ceiling were four slotted openings, spaced evenly around the curve of the dome, and about half way to its apex. When she moved her torch beam to one side, she could see a distant gleam of skylight, as though from the end of a long, narrow shaft. 'What are they, ventilators?'

'They would perform that function when the tomb was being built, certainly. But they sometimes served more mystic purposes, such as allowing the spirit of the deceased an easy path to heaven. They might also be aligned with specific stars or the sun at a particular time of year, for a form of resurrection ceremony.'

'Well, they might be fine for a spirit to slip through, but no way are we going to make it. They can't be much over six inches wide.'

'Remember the molecular cutter. I can use that to widen the aperture.'

'But those shafts beyond must be at least five or six yards long.

That's a lot of rock, Doctor, and the cutter doesn't cut all that deep at one go, does it? Why can't we just go out through the ante-chamber door? It would manage that easy.'

'Because it is most unlikely that the door simply opens out onto the street. And if it did, think of the attention we would draw if we suddenly emerged from Cleopatra's tomb. Until there is evidence to the contrary, we must assume there is a busy city outside, which we would be well-advised to inspect from a distance first. In any case, it's probable that there are more doors and passages beyond the antechamber pair, all of which will be barred, sealed and even buried.

Considering this tomb is relatively new, they might be guarded or perhaps open into a secondary temple in current use — .'

'Okay, Doctor, you've sold me. But it's still going to mean a lot of digging.'

The Doctor beamed, like an overgrown schoolboy with a secret.

'Possibly not. Everything we have seen indicates a fusion of different cultures, both in religion and architecture. This vault is not Egyptian, but an advanced Roman design.'

'So? I can still see a lot of stonework between us and the outside.

There has to be if we're inside some sort of pyramid.'

'Perhaps it looks like a pyramid on the outside, but I doubt if the Romans would go to the trouble of constructing it of solid stone. I don't think a chamber this size could support the weight if that were so ...'

Peri was beginning to catch on. 'You mean it's hollow?'

'There's a good chance that at least the upper part is but, as you said earlier, we must be empirical about the matter. Let's get a ladder and find out.'

Ten minutes later, they were shifting several priceless pieces of furniture to make a space under one of the vent slots. Peri was horrified at the thought of damaging anything, but also increasingly annoyed with the makers of the more substantial pieces for not having learned how to build anything lightweight. This, she suspected, had not troubled Cleopatra, who probably had people in to do her removals.

Eventually the space was made, and she gratefully flopped down on a chaise-longue style couch, uncaring about what the previous owner would have thought of the liberty. 'Phew! Is it hot or cold in here, I can't tell?'

The Doctor was mopping his brow with a large white handkerchief.

'It's a trifle enervating, I admit. Possibly the rather dead air in here ...'

he coughed '... and the dust doesn't help.' He blew his nose loudly.

'Anyway, we must get on. There will be plenty of fresh air outside.'

The ladder the Doctor had brought from the TARDIS, Peri discovered, was an ordinary aluminium extending type that she could have found in any hardware store back in her own time. It even bore a well-known brand name. Propped up against the lower lip of the vent shaft, it seemed oddly out of place, symbolizing the mass production ethos of another age, standing as it did amongst uniquely handmade goods. By further contrast, the molecular cutter the Doctor was checking over represented the science of a time perhaps as far removed from Peri's own as she was from ten BC. A hand-held projector unit, in the form of a thick silver tube, was connected to a heavy rectangular energizer unit by a coiled cable. It made no sound when it operated, but Peri knew it could cut through most materials like the proverbial hot knife through butter. As a bonus, it could also re-bond them invisibly afterwards. A neat trick, she thought.

The Doctor clipped the unit to his belt and ascended the ladder, while Peri steadied its feet. He reached the vent and Peri could hear him muttering to himself in apparent satisfaction. 'Stand clear below!'

he ordered dramatically. There was a moment's silence, then a scrape of stone over stone and a slice of Roman concrete roof vault broke on the floor.

For the next few minutes there was a steady rain of such fragments.

Peri could see the Doctor was cutting away one side of the narrow vent shaft so it was wide enough to take his shoulders, whistling tunelessly as he worked. He came down the ladder, adjusted it so that it projected further into the excavation, and ran back up again.

He was up to his waist in the hole when there came the crash of a heavy slab falling all of a piece. 'Are you okay?' Peri called up anxiously, only to see the Doctor's legs disappearing through the hole.

There was a long silence, then: 'Come up and take a look' He sounded pleased with himself.

Cautiously, Peri climbed the ladder, torch in hand. She felt a momentary dizziness half way up, and had to take a few deliberate deep breaths. I really will be glad to get out of this place, she thought.

Reaching the hole the Doctor had cut in the roof, she found the cause of his satisfaction. He is going to be insufferably smug for having worked this out, she told herself.

The dome was, she estimated, about a yard thick where the vent shaft pierced it. A fine wire mesh, presumably to keep out insects, had been cut away to reveal the shaft beyond, which was formed of relatively thin slabs of stone bound together by metal cramps and straps, and supported by heavy timbers. She could tell this because one of the side slabs, the one she had heard fall, was missing, revealing a void beyond, from which came the flash of the Doctor's torch. Peri scrambled through, scraping her knees, and found herself in a space resembling a huge attic. A forest of posts and struts, braced against the curve of the dome, supported the rafters of a great sloping roof, which faded into the gloom on either side of her. It was the inner face of one side of a pyramid.

'Interesting construction methods,' said the Doctor, who was squatting on the curve of the dome, playing his torch beam over the interior. 'Finely dressed limestone slab facing, with inner joints sealed and bedded with pitch and sand — .'

'Spare me the lecture, Doctor. I can see it's all very clever, but where do we go now?'

'Downwards. There is a level floor where the dome ends, and we can reach the base of the pyramid wall. Then it should only mean cutting away a section of a relatively thin slab to reach the outside.'

'But where will we be then?'

'On the roof of a temple, I rather think.'

'Well anywhere's better than in here,' said Peri, scratching irritably at some grit that seemed to have gone down the back of her shirt. 'I just want to see some daylight!'

A minute later they were standing on a level floor at the base of the dome, amid the chippings and scraps of builders' waste, and the

Doctor was cutting a neat ovoid out of the middle of the lowest wall slab. It came free and they eased it to the ground. Low morning sunlight flooded in through the opening. They squinted against the brightness, breathing in the fresh air gratefully. Even the Doctor, Peri noticed, seemed to be glad of the change.

Beyond a guttering channel was an expanse of flat stone-slab roof, broken only by a flat-topped structure walled by fretted stonework, rather like a simple skylight. Otherwise there was no sign of movement, except for a few birds wheeling in a blue sky, dotted with a few puffy clouds.

They slipped through the hole and stood upright. Peri realized that the pyramid cap of the tomb rose from the middle of a great square expanse of roof, presumably of the surrounding temple building. The Doctor was looking around him in satisfaction.

'Yes. Quasi-Egyptian design, you see, but executed with Roman techniques of detailing and construction.'

As they walked away from the wall of the pyramid, the skyline of Rome unrolled before them. They lay flat as they reached the edge and Peri peered cautiously over a low parapet to the ground some fifty or sixty feet below A broad flight of steps led down from the colonnade fronting the temple to a wide, stone flagged plaza, presently occupied by pedestrians dressed in variously coloured robes and tunics. Peri edged back a little. It wouldn't do to be seen up here just yet, she thought.

Judging by the sun they were facing almost due south, so Cleopatra's tomb was set on a hill to the north and east of the centre of Rome. Probably one of the famous Seven Hills, Peri realized, trying to remember their names. She could see the line of the Tiber snaking off across the plains to their right, crossed by several bridges leading to a sprawl of buildings flowing up the hills on the further bank. She was surprised how small the city itself seemed, no more than three miles across at the most, she estimated, being bounded by a straggling fortified wall. Its centre was a confusion of broad plazas and rows of monumental columns and the great angular roofs of temples, all lying along different axes. Towards the outskirts, the streets seemed to narrow, twisting between blocks of apartments, three or four storeys high, with a few grander buildings dotted between them. One large, drum-like structure stood out distinctly.

Was it the Colosseum, she wondered?

It was some moments before the details that were out of place registered, because in other circumstances they would have been quite unremarkable.

'Doctor, do those poles running along that street down there look like they're carrying electricity cables — and are they anything to do with those, uh, street lamps I think I can see next to them?'

'Yes, I believe they are. And have you noticed the roof of that large building to the left of the central forum?'

'Oh, yeah, the one with radio aerials on, you mean ... hmm.'

'And look out over the plain to the east.'

Peri's eyes followed the line of the multiple arches of an aqueduct that marched out towards the distant hills. There were a lot of buildings in the far distance, with smoke rising from them, like a small industrial works. Then she saw what the Doctor meant. About a mile from the city walls, the pale streamlined form of an airship trailed from its mooring mast. Suddenly she realized what one of the background shapes in the ante-room frieze had been. It had been oddly distorted, and she supposed they must have been quite new at the time and given the artist some trouble.

'These guys have sure been busy,' she stated. 'But how long has it taken them? I mean, when did they take off on a different track of history? If those paintings on the walls downstairs are right, then the battle of Actium was the turning point. So whatever it was must have happened not long before that, right?' The Doctor inclined his head politely in agreement with her reasoning. 'But,' she continued, 'that means in less than twenty-five years, say, they've also invented electricity generation, airships, radio and who knows what else? Even if what we see is all they've got, it's quite an achievement.'

'Well,' the Doctor replied, 'this culture was probably more prepared, technically, to take the first steps of an industrial revolution, than Northern Europe was seventeen hundred years later.

But I agree, this is far too much progress in such a short space of time for it to be natural. They must be working from finished designs.

Consider all the painful years of research and development that would save.'

'But how? And who, or why?'

'That, we will have to find out.'

'Still, it's some short-cut,' Peri conceded.

'But dangerous,' he responded, grimly. 'Your own age can hardly keep pace with a constant stream of technological changes and the social and ethical problems arising from them. Ability must not outstrip wisdom. What all this might do to these people, I shudder to think!'

Peri thought she had never seen him look so grave. She tried to sound a brighter note. 'Well, at least they seem to have power going spare down there. Maybe we can tap into some to recharge the TARDIS?'

'Yes, that must be our next step. Then, well, we shall see.' He started to work away from the roof edge. 'First, of course, we must get down to the ground.'

Peri was sitting upright, scratching again. 'Say, do you think there were any bugs in the tomb?' she asked, rolling up the sleeve of her shirt. 'I seem to be — .'

She gave a little choking gasp of fear.

Fine, dark feathers were growing out of her forearm.

She looked at the Doctor in mute horror. He was at her side in an instant, clasping her hand with firm reassurance. 'It's all right, Peri.

Let's get back to the TARDIS. Don't worry.'

Convulsively, Peri tore open the top of her shirt with her free hand.

A diamond patch of feathers was spreading across her sternum and down between her breasts. She was trembling with shock. 'V—Varos

...' she stuttered shrilly. 'It's Varos again!'

With an effort, the Doctor got her to her feet and, half carrying her, he helped her stagger back towards the hole in the pyramid wall.

Then, just as they reached it, Peri distantly seemed to hear him mumble: 'Sorry, but I don't think I feel quite ...' And his legs buckled and he collapsed forward and lay motionless at her feet.

For a terrible moment she stared at him uncomprehendingly, her mind reeling under the double shock. Then she knelt down, feebly tugging at the arm of his coat. 'No, p—please, Doctor — not now! I need you

to help me.'

There was no response. She heaved and managed to roll him over onto his back.

The face staring up at her was that of a younger man, with thin, sensitive features and paler, straight flaxen hair. It was the face the Doctor had worn when she had first met him.

VIII

Captain Septimus Fabio paused, grasping the handrails firmly and glanced quickly back down the long walkway, eyes straining in the grey light that filtered through the arching fabric roof. He listened intently for the sound of any crewmen who might be approaching.

There was the distant, surprisingly quiet, drone of the engines, and the many whispering creaks and groans of the intricate latticework frame of the *Horus,* but there was no sound of any other feet on the gangway. By all the Gods let it remain so, he thought.

He licked his dry lips, realizing his knuckles showed white where he held the railing. He was shivering, partly from the chill in the space about him, which was ventilated to prevent an explosive mixture of gas and air building up, but mostly because he was scared.

He was scared that somehow *She* knew what he had done.

He was scared of what Rome would do if they ever learned of his failure.

But above all, he was scared by the monstrous artifact in which he was travelling.

She had been quite wrong in suggesting he might be afraid of flight. He had no fear of heights, and there was no great sensation of speed, once the airship was clear of the ground. What repulsed him was the total artificiality of his surroundings.

Stealthily, he continued down the long, gently humped curve of the gangway, his boots falling softly on its narrow strip of boarding.

Wooden boards! Almost the only natural material on the ship.

Everything else was fabric and metal. But the vast spread of fabric used to cover the ship and contain the lifting gas was hardly natural.

It had been woven on powered looms and then treated to make it gastight. And the metal of the structure was not something familiar, like copper, bronze or iron. It was a white metal, unusually light, but strong: skymetal, it was called by some, smelted in the priest-technicians' electric forges. From this had been machined the tens of thousands of identical struts and plates, assembling into thousands of rectangular frame elements, each in turn subdivided by bracing wires into identical, repetitious, triangular patterns.

Endless mechanical repetition, endless sameness. Nothing had ever been made quite like that before, he thought. It was wrong, it was alien — and he had been given a chance to destroy both it and *Her*.

And now he was throwing that chance away.

But he had no choice. He was not the suicidal type.

Fabio slowed his pace. He was now crossing over the grey bulk of the fourth gas cell from the tail of the *Horus*. It was only a couple of cubits below his feet, straining upward against the mesh of its securing net. As he reached the central rib frame of the five that encircled the great gas bag, he paused, looked back the way he had come, then quickly knelt down and reached under the planking of the walkway.

He was standing again in a moment, clasping a small object in his hand, his heart pounding with relief. It had still been there, untouched!

It was a flat box of light wood, perforated with a regular pattern of drilled holes, trailing a short length of thin cord from an eyelet set in one end. He opened a latch with trembling fingers. Inside, clockwork powered cogs turned slowly under a dial and pointer. Beside this was a spring-loaded flint striker nestling against a wad of oil-soaked cotton. Carefully, he locked back the striker arm and closed the lid again. If you find a chance to use it, your reward will be great, he had been told. Well, they would never need to know of his failure, and his reward would be to continue to live.

For the first time since they had departed, he breathed freely. He was safe. Even if *She* came upon him this very moment, he could claim he had found the incendiary during the execution of his loyal duties as a special security officer. Briefly, he toyed with the idea of taking it to her to show how he had foiled an attempt on her life.

Surely that would negate any suspicions she might have of him. All he had to do was bluff it out to her face. He thought of those clear,

penetrating eyes boring into him. No, best be rid of the thing immediately.

Feeling more confident now, explanation at the ready should he be challenged, he walked back to the head of the vertical ladder that ran down between gas cells four and five to the keel of the ship. He glanced around once more, to reassure himself, then started quickly down. Either side of the ladder's protective hooping, the great gas bags swelled like billowing walls behind their web of restraining wires. At the bottom, he climbed the short flight of steps that curved up the inside of the belly of the craft until he reached the lateral gangway that ran almost the entire length of the great airship. He turned aft again. There was a tiny secondary control cabin set in the bottom of the leading edge of the *Horus*'s huge lower rudder fin, which served as a mounting for a swivelling tail wheel, to match the one set under the forward control cabin. It should be empty at this point in the flight. From there he could dispose of the incendiary unobserved.

The engine noise got louder. Two crewmen were checking the gimballed mountings that supported one of the rear pair of motor nacelles, the flashing propeller of which he could see through a row of observation portals. More unnatural devices! Steam engines he could just understand, but why did these monstrosities have to be fed with the burning oil found under the sands of Babylonia?

The crewmen pressed against the hull to let him past, bowing their heads. He ignored them. He had no time for native Egyptians.

Normally, they were good only for slaves or manual labour, but in some way they had become associated with the airships so that they now formed the majority of the ordinary crewmen. Amongst themselves, such work was held in high esteem — something to do with moving nearer to their gods, he understood. *She* had encouraged the belief, apparently. That they actually seemed capable of operating the machinery of the ship was further proof, in Fabio's eyes, that there was something improper in its nature. He clutched the incendiary tightly to him. Why had fate trapped him like this? Why could they all not have burned?

In another minute he had reached the tail section and was climbing down the ladder into the fin itself. The tiny cabin was empty, as he had hoped.

For a moment he paused, blinking in the sudden bright light entering the cabin's several windows, arrested, despite his feelings, by the view.

Overhead was the great bulk of the *Horus*'s fuselage, curving away smoothly before him, seeming to extend into infinity, its perfect lines only broken by the distant bulge of the control cabin a full *stadia* length away. Everything else beyond was sky and deep blue sea. Alexandria was well behind them, and in a few hours they would be passing by the western edge of Crete. But for now there was only the brilliant reflection of the sun off a calm sea, without even the speck of a fishing boat to be seen.

Fabio opened one of the sliding window panels, which allowed instructions to be given to the ground crew during mooring operations. Air blasted in, reminding him again of their actual speed, though the airship seemed to hang motionless in the blue void.

Alexandria to Rome in one day! It was magnificent and it was frightening and it was change too fast. *She* eagerly embraced all things new, it seemed, but did she realize how many she offended by doing so? Somebody would stop her ... eventually. But not him this day, it appeared. Regretfully, he tossed the incendiary out of the window and saw it tumble away into the blue.

Then he heard a step on the ladder. The step of a big man who has no need to walk quietly anymore. Fabio turned quickly, ready to explain himself, and froze when he saw who it was. For the last time, his fear returned, and with it the knowledge of who had thrown Xanthes to the crocodiles.

Reflex drove his hand to seek his pistol, but his belt was empty. Of course. All firearms and swords were stowed in lockers during flight, for fear of an accidental shot or spark igniting the flammable lifting gas.

And then he knew that he was going to die —

— and that *She* had known everything all along.

IX

It was like this on Androzani, thought Peri dizzily, as she and the Doctor tumbled through the door of the TARDIS.

The Doctor collapsed to the floor beside the console, mumbling and groaning as though in a delirium. She sank to her knees beside him, gasping for breath. It had been a desperate effort on her part to help the Doctor in his confused state back to the TARDIS, half-carrying him much of the way. But somehow she had made it. In between gasps she

managed a shaky smile, purely for her own benefit. Sure puts your priorities in order, she told herself, when the person you've come to rely on most in the world — make that the *universe* — is in trouble; you tend to downgrade trivial personal problems, like ...

Gingerly, she pulled up one shirt sleeve and tried to view the patch of feathers on her forearm dispassionately. They were very smooth and fine, a deep warm brown with a faint iridescent sheen. I suppose they'd look okay on a bird, she acknowledged, but it's me they're growing on. Again.

Visions of the Reshapement Chamber on Varos surged into her mind. The nightmare memory of how the transmogrifier radiation felt as it bored into her, distorting the very cells of her body so that they would metamorphose at the bidding of her uncontrolled subconscious mind.

The Doctor groaned loudly, cutting through her dark thoughts. She turned to him, wondering if she could make him comfortable where he lay, because she wasn't sure she had the strength to move him further.

Then she saw his features flow like melted wax, and for a moment his face seemed to ripple and blur. A halo of straight blond hair twisted, curled and became a tint darker. The multi-coloured coat, which had hung loosely round the slender frame of the younger Doctor, suddenly seemed to fill out.

And then it was the same Doctor lying on the floor who had left the TARDIS with her when they had first stepped out into the tomb.

His eyes flickered open and he stared up at her, frowning. 'Why am I lying on the floor of the control room?' he enquired tersely.

'Don't you remember, Doctor? We were out on the temple roof, and you *changed*.'

The Doctor's hands flew to his face, probing his features anxiously.

'Not again,' he moaned.

'No, I mean you changed back to the way you looked when I first met you. And you got terribly confused and I had to help you down from the roof. But just now you changed back ... No, I guess I mean forward, again, to what you were before ... That is, today. Oh, hell —

what I mean is, Doctor, that you're back to normal again. Leastwise, as

normal as somebody like you ever can be.'

The Doctor sat up, cautiously feeling his limbs. 'I believe I resent that last comment' Recollection suddenly dawned, and he turned a concerned face to her. 'Peri — your arms ... the feathers ...'

She held up her arms with the sleeves pulled back. 'Still there, I'm afraid.' With a little what-the-hell shrug, she pulled open her shirt dramatically and peered down. 'Still feathers there too. But I don't think they've spread further, have they?' She looked at him desperately for reassurance. Then suddenly her nerve seemed to fail and she wrapped the shirt tightly about her again and rocked back on her heels, eyes screwed shut. 'Why, Doctor? Why has it happened to me again? Is it anything to do with where we are, and what happened to you?' Tears flowed down her cheeks. 'Doctor, I'm frightened!'

The Doctor got to his feet and helped her up in turn. He held her firmly by the shoulders with comforting strength, and regarded her with his bright, keen eyes. 'Whatever has happened,' he said, in his severe but not unkind way, 'we will sort it out. But there is nothing to be gained by giving in to panic.'

Peri sniffed bravely. 'I know that, but you gotta allow me a little leeway, here, Doctor. I mean, I'm not used to my body changing on me all of a sudden like you are. It takes some getting used to.'

The Doctor raised a sardonic brow. 'For that matter, I'm not used to the sort of change you describe happening to me, either. *Retro-regeneration*. That's not something that's supposed to occur naturally.

Indeed, only Time Lords of the first rank have ever tried to initiate the process deliberately.'

Peri managed a weak, mischievous smile. 'Oh, so tell me just what rank are you, Doctor?'

He frowned at her with mock severity. 'I can see your sense of irreverence has not been affected by your experience — more's the pity.'

The Doctor pulled up the Sheraton chair next to the sea chest and they sat down.

'What has happened to us,' he continued, switching to what Peri thought of as his Lecture Mode, 'is clearly linked, in some way, to the energy flux tube which altered our course, the breaking of the link

with the Eye of Harmony, and the trace energy field I can still detect.'

'But why should any of that make our bodies go haywire?'

'Because there are particular types of hyperspatial stress or frequencies of radiation, which, if applied in the right circumstances, can destabilize the physical forms of objects, as you learned on Varos. Indeed, Time Lord physiognomy takes advantage of this potential instability, at certain times. Now, travelling in a dematerialized state, as the TARDIS does, can make you even more vulnerable to such events. Which is why one of its functions is to project what you might call a "morphic field" to protect not only its own pattern, but also those of its passengers. Unfortunately, during the power loss, we must have been exposed to just such destabilizing conditions. And now, without power to boost the TARDIS's shields and stabilizing fields, and isolated in some way from normal space, we remain in an unstable state.'

'But why have we changed the way we have?'

'Our bodies are seeking a new point of stability, or at least, a point of least instability. For a Time Lord, that is his former incarnation —

.'

'Why not into a totally new body?'

'Because there has been no actual trauma to trigger normal progressive regeneration.'

'And me?'

'Subconsciously, you still hold the memory of the Varos transformation within you. That alone may have been sufficient, in these conditions. Remember, we also arrived on Varos short of power. By association that may have influenced the manner of your change. Also, the natural unconscious desire to escape from the confines of this tomb — '

'Yeah, to be free as a bird. Some joke. But look, things do seem to have steadied up now we're inside again. I'm not getting any worse, and you've snapped right back.'

'Only temporarily, I'm afraid. If we went outside again the process would resume, probably more rapidly. And when the power in here finally dies, the stabilizing effect will be gone too.'

Peri looked alarmed. 'How long have we got?'

'At this low level, a few hours, no more.'

'So, the first thing we've got to do is to get some power, right?'

'That would improve our situation considerably.'

'Well, we know Rome has electric power. Can you tap into some of that?'

'Possibly. But it'll need a considerable amount to charge the system sufficiently to initiate mass conversion. And of course, it would take time to arrange, and such a power drain would be bound to be noticed.' He scowled and slumped a little in his chair, appearing dejected at the thought of the task ahead.

Peri gestured at the dark and gloomy control room, dotted with the glow-blobs she had stuck to the walls. 'But what can we do now?' She frowned at the Doctor, wondering if he was not still thinking a little slowly after his recent transformations. 'Come on, Doctor,' she urged,

'don't be so negative. There must be a way of grabbing power from somewhere.'

The Doctor scratched his head, then suddenly exclaimed: 'Of course: the transductor cells!'

'Sounds like a lame-brain pop group to me. What are they?'

The Doctor, mercurial as ever, had sprung to his feet beaming, and radiating a new sense of purpose. 'You'll see,' he said enthusiastically, and, picking up a torch, he disappeared through the door into the interior of the TARDIS. A few moments later, there came the sound of a very large storeroom being turned out.

That was the Doctor for you, Peri thought: down one minute, up the next. It didn't help, of course, that the TARDIS was like an infinitely capacious attic room, packed with treasures and curios gathered over hundreds of years, which had been sorted away and forgotten about. She wondered if he ever got around to spring cleaning — or perhaps, one day, he would hold the ultimate garage sale ...

The Doctor returned carrying an armful of black disc-shaped objects, vaguely reminiscent of World War II limpet mines.

'Transductor cells,' he announced proudly. 'They can be adjusted to absorb energy over a wide spectra, and transmit it back to the TARDIS via a hyperspatial loop. I'm going to set some of these to act as solar absorbers — '

'Like solar power cells?'

'Precisely. Then we only need to place them on the roof of the temple and we can start drawing power. Not much, of course, but it should maintain the status quo.'

'Hold on, Doctor.' Peri was frowning. 'These gizmos sound okay, but if we have to go outside to set them, we'll just continue changing, and I'm not going to drag you back here again!'

'That problem had occurred to me,' said the Doctor reproachfully.

'I'm going to make portable morphic resonator units for us to carry.

These will link us to the TARDIS and should maintain our present patterns.'

'Well that's great. How long will they take to make?'

'Oh, only a couple of hours.'

It was Peri's turn to look reproachful. 'Can you guarantee we've still got a couple of hours of power left? What happens if you go retro again before you can finish the job?' She took a deep breath, as though gathering her resolve. 'Perhaps it would be sensible, if you tell me what to do, that I take these things outside alone, while you get right on with building these resonator units.'

The Doctor looked doubtful. 'Are you sure you want to go?'

'No,' she replied sharply, 'but I don't see how we've any choice.

This change thing seems to affect me gradually, but you become pretty well helpless. We can't risk that again, but I guess I can live with a few more feathers.'

'Your reasoning is impeccable,' he conceded, smiling gently.

The Doctor laid one of the transductor cells on the console and opened a lid in its middle, revealing three small coloured dials, which he adjusted carefully. 'Place them along the pyramid wall, where they'll catch the most sun. When they are in position, twist the centre section clockwise through ninety degrees like this ...' A spray of ribs extended from around the edge of the disc like an unfurling flower, spreading a fine black mesh between them '... then the unit is activated.'

Peri nodded. 'I see. Okay, let's get on with it.'

'You should be able to carry four cells. Remember not to spend any more time setting them than you must.'

'Doctor, I assure you, I won't be hanging around to admire the view. I'll be ten minutes, tops. You can time me.'

Peri was back inside the TARDIS in under nine minutes. She had placed the cells without incident, but she was carrying her boots and

her feet were bare. The Doctor noticed there were thicker feathery growths around her ankles and extending up her calves, and her toe nails had started to extend and curve to form talons. 'I guess I'll just have to find some open sandals for the time being,' she commented, with slightly brittle levity. 'Is the power coming in okay? The console sure looks brighter.'

'It is. Thanks to your efforts we can maintain the present minimal functions indefinitely,' the Doctor confirmed.

'But we're still a long way from building up the reserve we need?'

'A very long way, but it's a start.'

'How many more of the cells are there?'

'Six. I thought I'd put out four more on the roof when I've finished the resonator, and save the other two for some more concentrated energy source — if I can find one.'

'Hey. You're making up two of those things, remember. We're both going outside.'

The Doctor looked uncomfortable. 'Unfortunately, I can only find enough components for one unit. I seem to have let the spare part stock run a little low.'

'You mean I've got to stay cooped up in here, alone?'

'I'm afraid so. In any case, I don't think local costume would suit you now. You'd have to be conspicuously overdressed now to conceal your ... abnormalities.'

'Well thank you for putting it so delicately,' retorted Peri bitterly.

She pressed her fingertips to her forehead for a moment and sighed heavily. 'Sorry, Doctor. Please, just go out there and do whatever you have to for us to get back to normal again. And whatever it is, do it quickly.'

X

Markus Vitellius managed to turn his salute into a subtle mockery by the exaggerated phrasing of his greeting.

'All hail, Ptolemy Caesar, Consul of Rome and Triumvir of the Dominion. I bring you greetings from your brother Alexander Helios

Antonius Ptolemy, Triumvir of the Dominion, Praetor Supreme and Dictator of Rome.'

One small stool was set ready before Ptolemy's study desk for his visitor's use. Pointedly, a far more comfortable chair had been pulled well back to the wall. Had Vitellius been a welcome guest, it should, by tradition, have been offered to him. Vitellius appeared not to notice this slight, however, and seated himself on the stool as though it were a throne. He was dressed in his Praetorian Guard Prefect's uniform today, allowing him to display on his harness a row of *phalerae* and a silver *torque*, his decorations for bravery. This in turn was a slight to Ptolemy, showing that Vitellius knew of his past military ventures — and their consequences.

There was no love lost between the two men.

Ptolemy sighed. 'Say what you must, Vitellius, then be gone. There can be little purpose in this meeting, as surely both you and Alexander know full well. I will never give my approval to further work on *Ultimus*.'

'Surely, Consul, there is always purpose in maintaining a frank exchange of views,' Vitellius suggested, with studied politeness.

'After all, one never knows if even long-held positions — on either side — might have shifted, even by the smallest margin, and so let some fair compromise be made where before there had only seemed an iron-bound stalemate.'

'Oh, has Alexander changed his mind, then? For I have not.'

Vitellius opened a leather tube hung on his belt and withdrew a scroll which he presented to Ptolemy. 'The Dictator, after much thought, has caused his plans and intentions to be set down in a new form' Ptolemy unrolled the document. 'It is intended that this provision be put to the senate to clarify the Dictator's options on the use of *Ultimus* in a time of extreme emergency. Your support would be welcome, and perhaps advisable.'

Ptolemy ignored the implied threat. He read the document carefully, then looked up at Vitellius scornfully.

'The wording of this resolution is so vague and general as to give excuse to use Ultimus in almost any circumstance. What form of emergency are you contemplating? It does not give any example. And here it says: "to deploy against enemies both domestic and foreign"

but it does not give any definition of what this means, either inside or outside the Dominion, that I can see. What does "domestic" mean, Vitellius? Those in the next country, or the next city, or outside the city walls?' Ptolemy threw the scroll down in disgust. 'Is Alexander totally mad? He saw the test of *Ultimus* himself and knows its dangers.'

'The Dictator is well aware of its effects, and also of its value to the security of the Dominion.'

'But we have no need for such a thing. The world is finite, though Alexander cannot seem to appreciate the fact. There is no external enemy or threat to the Dominion, and *Ultimus* is too terrible to use within our borders.' Ptolemy gathered up the scroll and tossed it back at Vitellius. It rebounded from his chest and fell to the floor. 'Take it back to Alexander. Tell him I will not give my endorsement to this insane proposition.'

Vitellius picked up the scroll and carefully rewound it and stowed it away, an amused sneer twitching about his lips. 'That is your last word, Consul?'

'It is.'

Vitellius's eyes glinted for a moment, almost in satisfaction. 'So be it, then. Farewell, Consul.' And he turned on his heel and marched out of the room without a parting salute.

Five thousand feet above the Mediterranean, the Royal Flagship *Horus* pursued its steady droning course for Rome.

From the windows of the royal stateroom, the distant purple smudge that was Crete showed clearly. It was a view that Captain Maxentius found his eyes being repeatedly drawn to. Anything but look Her straight in the face. There was also a third person in the room, whose presence did nothing to lessen his discomfort.

'So,' Cleopatra Selene confirmed, mildly, 'you can find no trace of Captain Fabio?'

'No, Majesty, and I have had the ship searched from stem to stern.'

'I'm sure you have been most diligent, Captain. But then, what can be the answer to this riddle? Fabio would hardly have stepped off the ship in mid-ocean deliberately, would he?'

Maxentius's tone was absolutely expressionless. 'That is why I thought

it best to report to you at once, Majesty, before sending any message back to Alexandria — while we are still in range.'

Cleopatra Selene smiled beneficently, as though she was pleased with a child for having accomplished some minor cleverness. 'Quite correct, Captain. There is no point in spreading news of such a tragedy, if such there has been, without attempting to discover the explanation first.' A thought appeared to strike her. 'You know, I believe I can guess what happened. Did you notice that Captain Fabio seemed a little unwell as we boarded this morning?'

'I... think I did notice his manner was a little strange, now that you call it to mind, Majesty,' Maxentius agreed cautiously.

'Then is it not possible that he, suddenly taken sick, should open a window for relief? But, being unused to flight and the angle of these windows, he had the misfortune to overbalance and ...' She trailed off significantly.

All the compartment windows were designed against this very occurrence. None had been found that were open wide enough for a cat to fall through.

'Yes, Majesty, that is most probably what happened,' Maxentius said quickly. 'Shall I transmit this information to Alexandria?'

'Not just yet, I think. Why make haste to send bad news? Besides, I have a special mission for you and the *Horus* to perform after we reach Rome; something beyond the orders you have already received from Kharmon. I want to discuss the plan now, so there will be time enough to make the necessary preparations and rehearse the crew in their tasks.' Her eyes speared his, so he dared not even blink. 'It is most important that it be done exactly as I tell you' She smiled in a way that gave no reassurance whatsoever. 'You will not fail me, will you, Maxentius?'

Maxentius swallowed. 'No, Majesty. Just tell me what you wish done.'

An hour later Maxentius left for his own cabin, his mind dizzy with plans and black thoughts of what failure might bring.

Cleopatra Selene watched him depart with a lazy, satisfied smile.

She reclined on her couch and for the first time addressed the room's other occupant. 'You did well, Gandos. The removal of Fabio has proved most helpful in reminding Maxentius where his loyalties lie.'

In the corner of the room, a massive figure, clad simply in a belted tunic and calf-high *caligae*, stirred for the first time. He had been standing impassive and motionless for the last hour, but now he grunted and inclined his head at the compliment. Gandos did not indulge in unnecessary movement — though when the need arose, he could move both silently and fast — neither did he speak, or plot or scheme. Gandos was simply three hundred and twenty pounds of supremely capable killing machine, with an almost dog-like affection for and loyalty to his mistress and owner.

'Isn't fear such a wonderfully effective way of encouraging people to do their best in your service,' Cleopatra Selene mused rhetorically, smiling again, almost contentedly, at Gandos. 'Except for you, faithful Gandos. You serve because you enjoy what you do and you're very good at it.' There was another grunt of acknowledgement.

'Exactly. I do like to see people using their talents to the full. And in just two days, Gandos, it will be your turn to exercise your special skills again; perhaps it will be the most important service you'll ever render ... '

And as she spoke, her eyes shifted automatically to the other corner of the stateroom. There stood, slightly incongruous, a full-length mirror in an ornate frame. The surface gleamed, reflecting its surroundings with apparent perfection. But occasionally, just for a moment or two, the glass seemed to shimmer and ripple, in a way that had nothing to do with the vibration of the vessel. Then it settled and showed true once more.

XI

Peri sat, elbows resting on the console, chin cupped in hands, and watched the people flow past on the monitor screen.

The point of view of the unseen camera was at about chest height, and every so often it turned about to face another direction.

Occasionally, people would appear to be looking directly at her —

which meant they had glanced at the medallion the Doctor was wearing on a chain round his neck, within which the miniature camera was concealed. It also contained a tiny microphone, which transmitted the hubbub of conversation that filled the Forum Romanum, through which the Doctor was currently making his way.

At the moment, Peri had muted the volume and was staring at the

almost silent picture with frustration, contemplating the irony of the situation.

Here I am, she thought, in the middle of ancient Rome — at least, a version of ancient Rome — having come with the object of rubbing shoulders with the actual genuine people of the time, and the best I can do now is watch them on television, courtesy of the Doctor's own hidden eye channel. So okay, it's great that the Doctor's out and about safely and the morphic resonator concealed in his wristband seems to be working, but let's face it, it's simply boring being cooped up in here like, like ... the Birdwoman of Alcatraz. Irritably, she scratched the patch of feathers on her arm.

The miniature audio-visual equipment had been another item the Doctor had suddenly recalled he had tucked away 'somewhere', just before he left an hour earlier. With it had come a pea-sized earpiece and a throat microphone, which he had concealed under a light scarf.

This had given them two-way communications, a boon which Peri had almost instantly regretted, as it allowed her to witness, with an alarming sense of helplessness (and occasional unintentional giggles), the Doctor's descent through the temple roof 'skylight' and down onto a gallery level below, hanging from what Peri thought was an inadequately slender cord in the process. Neither his build, which was not designed for acrobatics, nor his contemporary costume, of sandals, long tunic and cloak, which got tangled in his line, helped matters. But he had finally made it safely, and, equally importantly, unobserved. Fortunately, the upper levels of the temple seemed to be practically deserted at that hour, which was by then sometime after midday.

Peri had then been treated to a rapid sequence of images showing stairs, marble columns, a large statue of Cleopatra dominating the end of a lofty chamber, an entrance hall and the sun streaming in through large doors. Briskly, the Doctor had descended the broad flight of steps down to the plaza that opened before the temple-tomb.

When he was well clear, he turned around to examine their impromptu place of concealment from the outside. For the first time, Peri appreciated the visual impact of the line of towering columns that fronted the building, and how the eye automatically followed them up, past the blocks of the massive, decorated entablature, to the pyramid cap that rose from the heart of the building and seemed ready to pierce the sky. You had to hand it to the ancients, she conceded. When it came to architecture they knew how to make a

statement — which in this case was: this building is dedicated to somebody who was really somebody, whose importance you will be reminded of every time you pass it by.

The Doctor's first objective had been a practical but mundane visit to a money changer. By dint of going through the pockets in the TARDIS's huge wardrobe room, he had assembled a collection of old coins predating the present time, and hopefully exchangeable for local currency. Twenty minutes after leaving the tomb, with Peri in electronic attendance, he had made his way to one of the city's market streets.

To her eyes, the shops were singularly unimpressive, being hardly more than holes in the wall with shutters opened wide to display their wares. Many occupied the ground floor rooms of apartment blocks or even small private villas, with pairs of shops often flanking their front entranceways. Signs bearing symbols of their respective trades projected out over the platted awnings that shaded the shop fronts, almost touching their fellows across the narrow street. Above one was the self-explanatory device of a wooden disk painted to resemble a coin.

Peri had, subconsciously, been expecting the ten BC equivalent of armoured glass, or at least a lot of heavy bars. But the tiny, bearded man with the scales who assayed the Doctor's mixed offerings, seemed to work entirely out of one massive iron-bound chest. Of course, Peri thought, the two huge plug-uglies who loomed behind him and brandished no-nonsense spiked clubs in a very obvious manner might perhaps compensate for any lack of passive security measures.

After some negotiation, the Doctor bartered his assorted coinage, no doubt at a very unfavourable exchange rate, for a modest sum of local money. He secured his new funds in his belt pouch and set off up the street again.

'Where are you going now?' Peri enquired over the com-link. 'The central forum,' the Doctor replied, his words sounding slightly slurred. The throat mike allowed him to talk back by sub-vocalizing without speaking aloud, but it took some practice. To an onlooker, it might appear that he was mumbling to himself. 'It's the heart of the city's social and public life. Apart from learning of potential power sources, there might be some useful information about what has been going on here to be overheard.'

In fact, he came across something usefully informative at the next

street corner.

An alcove had been cut into the corner building, to provide shelter for three mounted busts, rather in the manner of an official public monument, Peri thought, or a wayside shrine. Assuming the sculptor had done them justice, the three were all handsome people. Two were men, one was a woman, and all were portrayed wearing laurel crowns. The man on the bottom right of the group, as Peri looked at them, was a little older than the other two, with a distinctive high forehead, but they all seemed to have similar features, as though they were related. There were inscriptions carved into the alcove wall behind them, which the Doctor had read rapidly. There was also, Peri couldn't help but notice, some graffiti adorning the official text.

'These appear,' said the Doctor, 'to be the Triumvirate currently ruling the Roman Dominion, and are all Cleopatra's children. The older man on the right is Ptolemy Caesar, her child by Julius Caesar, while the other two were fathered by Mark Antony. Cleopatra Selene and Alexander Helios. Alexander, according to the inscription, is Dictator of Rome.'

'You mean it's a title?'

'Yes. Julius Caesar was made a Dictator for life in forty-four BC. It was about the highest office the Republic could bestow. Usually the post was only granted for short periods in an emergency, but there was the temptation to have the term extended. Ambition and power exact their price as always.'

'What's the graffiti say?'

'Well ... it's not very complimentary to Alexander about certain taxes or apparently for entertaining an ambition to be Emperor.

Selene is castigated simply for being Queen of Egypt; old resentments die hard, it seems. Never mind. This is a start. I shall press on to the Forum to see what else I can discover.'

The Forum was an open space flanked by temples and public buildings, and overlooked by a row of statues mounted on columns and a triumphal arch. It was thronged with people in twos and threes and larger groups. Some were sitting playing complex little games on boards, the details of which Peri could not make out. Others were involved in debates, some quite heated, which were gathering their own small crowds of interested bystanders. In one corner an open-air court was apparently being held, with a proper seat for the magistrate

and a bank of steps for the spectators. The Doctor hesitated as he passed it, trying to hear the advocates' cases.

'Come on, Doctor,' Peri said. 'We don't need a lesson in Roman law right now.'

Reluctantly he moved on, pausing at each group that he came to, listening for anything that might prove useful. They overheard the makings of several potential scandals and snatches of an abstruse discourse on the merits of stoicism, but no further useful information.

It was more or less at this point that Peri had become bored and frustrated and turned down the volume.

After some thought, she turned the volume up again and said:

'Look, Doctor. This is fine in theory, but if nobody's conveniently giving a lecture on the history of the last quarter century for the benefit of displaced time travellers, then it's not going to do us a whole lot of good. Isn't there somewhere else you can try, like a library or something?'

'Unfortunately, a Roman library is unlikely to be up to date on the most recent events in any usefully objective form. In any case, as I don't know exactly what questions to ask, and would rather not call attention to myself by revealing my suspicious ignorance of common knowledge, research is likely to take some time.'

'Well where else can you go to pump people for the straight gossip without them becoming suspicious?'

There was a contemplative silence at the other end, broken suddenly by a loud exclamation, which surprised those people standing near the Doctor in the Forum. 'Of course! *In vino veritas!* '

'Huh? What do you mean?'

But the Doctor was already asking directions to the nearest *tabernae*.

Very shortly, the image on the monitor was bobbing forward at a brisk walking pace. As this made for confused watching, Peri took the opportunity to get up and stretch her legs.

For a few minutes, she carefully examined the patches of feathers on her body again for any indication they had spread further. They still covered the fleshier parts of her arms and legs, with distinctly thicker

growth about her ankles and calves. The diamond-shaped patch on her chest ran half-way to her navel. By twisting round in front of the mirror in her room, she could see a similar patch across her shoulders and running down her spine. There were markedly thicker tufts of feathers between her shoulder blades. Incipient wings? she wondered. She certainly couldn't recall feeling them on Varos — though of course, she hadn't exactly been taking notes at the time. Still, it did suggest the past was not simply repeating itself.

Perhaps, with the whole process occurring at a slower pace and not forced, it was more controlled. At least everything seemed stable for the moment. In fact, the feathers were not actually uncomfortable, she decided, feeling more like very soft, close fitting wool, and were pleasantly warm. I guess that's why birds use them, she thought with a grin. She looked at the sharp talons that her nails had shaped themselves into. And I've seen longer than these, she told herself, worn at parties and painted scarlet.

Pleased with her positive attitude, she idly walked to the exterior doors and peered out into the darkness, taking a breath of 'fresh' air ...

And froze, listening intently.

Faintly but distinctly, she could hear the sound of metal clinking and scraping against stone.

The *tabernae* under the sign of a Brown Bear certainly had atmosphere, conceded the Doctor — an amalgam of stale beer, lamp oil and sweat. The decor also lacked the charm normally associated with, for instance, the ideal English pub. The floor was carpeted with a mixture of rushes and sawdust that seemed in urgent need of changing. The bar, looming out of the gloomy interior, was a simple rough-sawn table polished black by use, backed by an unstable looking rack of shelves carrying assorted jars, kegs, cups and mugs, the latter either of pewter or carved wood. There were no glasses. He bought an unopened *choenix* of wine, which was the equivalent of slightly less than a litre, and selected the cleanest cup he could see.

He then scanned the room for his target. There were two or three huddles of people seated on stools and benches, hunched over their drinks cluttering the bar's assorted drink-stained tables. But the Doctor was looking for somebody sitting alone, preferably one who had reached that stage of needing to drink in company even if there was nobody actually with him.

Yes, in the corner of the room. A small man in late middle age. His clothes were somewhat drink-stained but they looked of fair quality.

His general appearance was that of a thinker rather than a manual worker. The Doctor casually walked over to him.

'Excuse me, good sir, but I am a stranger in town and I hate to drink alone. May I offer you some wine?'

The man looked up from his cup and tried to focus on the Doctor.

'What ... say?'

'I said,' repeated the Doctor, speaking loudly and clearly, 'that I would like to join you in a drink' He waved the bottle helpfully before the man's eyes.

Comprehension seemed to dawn. 'Yesh, yes,' he slurred, gesturing with his cup and spilling its remaining contents. 'Sit down, please yourself ... What does it matter anyway?'

The Doctor took a seat, steadied the man's cup, uncorked his own bottle and poured out a generous measure. His own cup he only half filled. 'Good health to you,' he said cheerfully, sipping (the wine was palatable, but with a distinct sediment and a hint of vinegar). 'I am Doktor of Tardis. May I enquire as to whom I have the pleasure of drinking with?'

The little man blinked slowly, frowning. 'Tardis... Is that in Greece?'

'A deceptively small island in the Cyclades — you would not have heard of it. But, do I infer that you are from that fine land?'

His companion drew himself up a little. 'I am Themos of Persalus, philosopher of natural pheno-phenomena.'

The Doctor beamed back at him. 'Master Themos, I think you are just the person I have been hoping to meet.'

Peri was kneeling on the ground just outside the TARDIS doorway, pressing her ear to the cold stone flags. For one wild moment, when she had first heard the sounds, she had visions of the mummy of Cleopatra lurching towards her out of the darkness. Then she realized the sounds were coming from below the level of the tomb chambers.

Unmistakably, it was the sound of digging. From this observation, the

image of tomb-robbers came very naturally to mind. Why did they have to pick just now? she thought bitterly. Of course, it might be simply building work in the temple downstairs. Somehow, she thought this was simply self—delusion. She got to her feet. All right.

If it is tomb-robbers, where are they going to come up, how long until they appear — and how do I break it to the Doctor?'

'So, how do you see the passage of history being affected by the progress of invention, Master Themos?' the Doctor ventured with studied carelessness. 'Say, for instance, over the last quarter century.

There have been so many changes by way of material discoveries that have influenced society, have there not?'

Themos was nodding animatedly, if unsteadily. The Doctor suspected he welcomed a companion to talk to. 'Nothing like it in ...

all recorded history,' he agreed.

'But what would you say was the major, underlying, cause of the changes?'

Themos blinked at him in puzzlement. 'Why, the Oracle of Alexandria, what else?'

'Of course the Oracle,' said the Doctor quickly, trying to sound as though he knew what he was talking about, 'but what I meant was the underlying factors beneath the obvious. I mean the, er, manner in which new concepts were applied. The human factor in their utilization. The element of chance ... destiny?' he trailed off lamely.

This appeared to make sense to Themos, who made a wise pyramid of his finger tips, after a few preliminary failures at making them meet, drew himself together and launched into a somewhat rambling lecture.

'Naturally, the timing of the discovery of the Oracle off the coast of Alexandria was crucial. Truly it was said that Serapis smiled on the Queen of the East and her consort in that hour. And consider, at what moment but that of immi-imminent war would so great a concentration of resources and effort be invested in turning the dreams the Oracle offered into reality. Imagine how the subsequent course of events might have run had this not occurred. Where would we be today?'

'Where indeed?' remarked the Doctor dryly.

Peri's voice suddenly buzzed in his ear: 'Doctor, I think something's happening here — .'

The Doctor hastily raised his cup to cover his lips and mouthed:

'Don't bother me now!'

'Well, be like that then!' And there was a click as she turned off

'Perhaps by now,' continued Themos, 'the revelation of the secrets of the steam-driven engine and the destructive force of the blasting powder, that were so decisive at ... urn, Actium, seem quite commonplace, but I recall at the time ... '

Back in the TARDIS, Peri was wondering if she hadn't been a little sharp with the Doctor. After all, he had obviously found someone useful to talk to. Perhaps it was just as well she hadn't told him. If he'd tried to race back here against the clock, he might be seen getting onto the temple roof. Anyway, calling for the Doctor's help as soon as there was a problem had almost become a habit. Surely she could think of something herself. She must be able to outwit a bunch of ancient Roman tomb-robbers. Think positive, she told herself again.

Yes, she was sure she could come up with something. But it would mean going outside the TARDIS for a while. Peri took a deep breath.

Well, hadn't she said she could cope with a few more feathers? This wasn't like before on Varos when she was panicked and confused.

This time *she* was in control.

Leaving the recorder running, so that she could review whatever the Doctor had discovered later, she picked up a torch and strode purposefully out into the ante-chamber.

Right. The first thing was to find where exactly they were going to come up.

She worked her way around the chamber, listening intently, then started up the stairs for the treasure vault. The digging sounds definitely seemed louder in that direction. In the vault, she went down on her hands and knees again and searched for the focus. Eventually, she identified a floor slab about half-way along one of the aisles as being their likely point of emergence. Well, she thought, right on

target, and they couldn't have more than a few feet to go. They would have a nice surprise when they lifted that slab. She sat back on her heels, grinning, and looked about her. Yes, there was bound to be everything she wanted here. She would see to it that they had the surprise of their lives.

'... and after the conso-consolidation of the Dominion, there came expansion into the Northern lands and Africa and Persia, then Ptolemy crossed to the East ... Themos paused, as though troubled by something. 'Anyway, the Dominion enjoyed many years of stability under Cleopatra and Marcus Antonius, and there was a general increase in prosperity and well-being which any thinking man can only, er, applaud. This, I know, many have claimed as proving the essential positive value of the Oracle devices. I say, however, that every sword has two edges, and the Gods may well, if it amuses them, choose to give us devices that give us as much misery as benefit, and judge us by our capacity to use them sensibly, like these infernal wire-lights and their poles going up all over the city. I ask you, how can a man observe the stars at night with all that light hazing the sky? And that electrical factory on the plain, belching smoke and covering the place with ... black stuff ... soot every time the wind blows the wrong way. I have complained, but does anybody listen?'

The Doctor filed away the information about the generating station for future reference, then tried to steer Themos away from what was clearly his pet hate. 'But what is your opinion on current events, now that Antonius and Cleopatra have gone?'

Themos sipped his wine and considered the question blearily. 'Well of course, their children were their only possible heirs — and fine people they are too,' he added hastily, with a quick glance about him as though concerned about who might be listening. 'But ... it must be admitted, there have been ... tensions. A triumvirate by its very nature is not a stable entity, history teaches us that. And now ...' He frowned uncertainly.

The Doctor poured him some more wine. 'Yes,' he said encouragingly, 'tell me what you think of things now.'

At the head of an almost vertical shaft rising through packed earth and rubble, Strabo's pick suddenly struck a solid slab above his head.

He pulled down his dust mask and stared hard. Below him, Decius froze in the act of passing another prop to Tiro. 'Is it the floor?' he asked, voice quivering with excitement.

Tiro grabbed the worklight and scrambled up the rungs of the shaft bracers until he was level with Strabo, peering intently upward.

'Yeah,' he said after a moment, 'I think it is. Get Cass up here — tell him we've made it!'

'... the division of the Dominion into East and West is really a product of different histories and populations, but the requirements of the Oracle devices have served to exasperate matters. Take, er, airships, for example. Apparently, the lifting gas for them needs electrical power to form it. Now, there are devices the Egyptians have for making this power directly from sunlight, but they work far more efficiently there than here. And the airship engines are not steam powered, you know, oh no, but driven by a type of flammable oil, which they can find under the desert sands. The con-consequence is that it is rumoured that they have made more and larger airships than we in Rome. Well, there is one source of unease between our own Dictator and his sister right away. And then of course, then there was the business of their mother's remains ... '

'Of course. Do tell me what you thought of that.'

Cassodorus's prominent teeth fronted a triumphant smile. 'I told you we'd get there anytime. I said they'd only filled in the core with light stuff, didn't I?'

'Well, that's modern building methods for you, isn't it?' sniffed Tiro. 'I remember my dad doing walls years ago. Good solid work that was.'

'What, those blocks of *insulae* by the river?' said Decius. 'They had to be shored up last year.'

'That wasn't his fault, that was subsidence — .'

'Lads, lads!' cut in Cassodorus. 'Stop talking and fetch the jack.

We've got a treasure vault to open.'

' ... so it was largely due to Ptolemy Caesar's mediation that the dispute was settled. He pointed out that, ah, just because she died while in Rome, her proper resting place was in Alexandria, but the treasures she had accumulated whilst here should stay. Still, it had taken two ... three years to resolve the matter, and her remains had already been interred in her tomb on the Viminal. Have you seen her tomb yet?'

'Just in passing,' said the Doctor. 'So what was finally decided?'

'Why, Cleopatra Selene is coming to collect her mother's remains

... Uh, what is the date? Oh, yes, she arrives tomorrow. There will be special games and various celebrations — you know, the usual entertainments to please the masses. Then, she'll take them back to Alexandria.'

The Doctor had suddenly tensed. 'You mean they'll be opening the tomb?'

'What? No, no. The casket has already been removed. It's lying in state in, um, the Temple of Serapis I think it is.'

The Doctor relaxed, looking relieved.

'Oh yes,' continued Themos, 'the tomb's all sealed up again now The silence of the treasure vault was broken by the grating of stone against stone and a regular squeak, squeak of metal, as if a heavy screw thread was being turned. Slowly, the edge of a thick floor stab rose upward by little jerks, and a crack of yellow electric light became visible. Wooden wedges were thrust into the widening gap from below, and slowly the slab was levered up far enough to allow a man to pass through. Hesitantly, Cassadorus climbed out of the hole carrying a hand lantern and peered about him.

After a moment he gave a strangled gurgle of surprise. 'By Juno's breasts, we actually did it!' he spluttered, half to himself. 'I never thought — .'

'What's that, Cass?' came a voice from below.

'Nothing, nothing. We're here, aren't we? Right where I planned.

Where else did you think we'd be?'

One by one, the robbers emerged from the shaft and looked about themselves in stunned silence.

'Cor — ain't it beautiful?' said Strabo in hushed tones. This seemed to break the spell.

'Beautiful my arse!' countered Tiro. 'This is money, lad, and don't you forget it. Don't go soft and sentimental on us now.' But there was a notable tone of awe in his words.

Hesitantly, as though they were afraid it was all a mirage that might fade away at any moment, they started touching and caressing the priceless riches that surrounded them. They looked into one another's faces. Suddenly, they started breaking into helpless fits of half—choked laughter, and picking up the smaller ornaments and tossing them about, intoxicated by their success. All but Strabo, whose lumpy features were creased by a worried frown.

'Cass, Cass,' he rumbled. 'You sure it's safe? I mean, *She*'s not still in here, is she?'

Cassadorus paused briefly in the middle of the impromptu jig he was dancing with Decius, whilst balancing the golden lid of an unguent jar on his head, to reassure him. 'I told you already, they took her away a month ago to be shipped off to Egypt. That's why we had to hold off the digging for a while, remember? There's nobody here now except —

'WHO DISTURBS THE SLEEP OF CLEOPATRA?'

The voice was female and eerily sepulchral. It echoed around the chamber, freezing the thieves into shocked rigidity, the dim lamplight casting their faces into rictuses of horror. In the centre of the chamber, what appeared to be a high chair draped in a sheet stirred. A white veil fell away and the figure of a woman appeared to rise to her feet. She wore the head-dress, gown and jewellery of an Egyptian queen, but her eyes and mouth glowed a ghostly green, and patches of her skin seemed peculiarly mottled. She took three paces towards them and raised an accusing hand.

The thieves' petrified tableau suddenly dissolved into a mad scramble for the raised slab, punctuated by oaths and cries of pure terror, as they all tried to squeeze through the narrow gap at once.

Then they were half falling down the shaft with a clatter of boots and rattle of dislodged stones from its walls. At that moment, there was no other thought in their minds but to escape from whatever shade of the dead they had so unwisely disturbed. Later, Decius, who was the unwilling last member of that frantic group, swore that he heard terrible laughter floating down the shaft after them.

Naturally, he didn't recognize that it had an American accent.

Back in the treasure chamber, Peri pealed the strips of glow-blob off her face, grinning in satisfaction. Carefully, she pulled one of the longer wedges free of the slab and used it to knock the others and the

jack-head away. The slab fell back into place with a satisfactory boom and thump, closing the shaft once more. She dragged a low table out of the pile of funereal goods and set it over the slab, then stacked several smaller pieces of furniture and assorted ornaments on top. If they came back again this way, she'd know it.

Returning to the centre of the chamber, she pulled the sheets off the throne chair and recovered the ancient gramophone horn and length of speaking tube which had been concealed beneath it, to return them to the TARDIS. She removed Cleopatra's head-dress and carefully carried it over to the ornate chest, where she had found it and the rest of her costume. The Queen of the Nile had certainly gone well prepared for the afterlife.

'Hope you didn't mind me borrowing this,' she whispered, on the general principle that it never hurt to be polite. 'But it was in a good cause.'

Peri started to strip off the gown, when she paused.

Something one of the thieves had said came back to her, and it didn't make sense. She picked up her torch and went over to the door beyond which the Doctor had said lay Cleopatra's actual mummy casket, and examined the rope seal tied across the handles. She pictured the similar type of seal they had cut away from the antechamber doors, and frowned. Quickly, she pulled off the rest of her disguise and returned it to the chest. She realized that her vestigial wings had definitely grown while she had been outside the protection of the TARDIS, and were chafing against the straps of her bra. Some sort of halter top would be more comfortable, she thought vaguely, more preoccupied with the puzzle she had just uncovered.

She hurried back to the TARDIS to see if she could interrupt the Doctor long enough to tell him about it. And to have something to eat, she added. Suddenly, she was feeling famished.

In the Brown Bear, the quantity of wine he had imbibed was finally taking its toll on Themos, and he was starting to turn morose once more. 'Pity, pity,' he mumbled, 'about Ptolemy Cess ... Caesar ...

Strong man. Could have been a great leader like his father, but made mistake of going to ... the East. Cursed place! Nobody listened to what he found, except me. I know what's there — and what it means

...' He focused mournful, bloodshot eyes on the Doctor. 'Should have saved your wishes of good health for yourself, Doktor.'

'Oh, why is that?'

Themos gave a hollow, miserable laugh and hung his head over his cup again. 'Because the world is coming to an end,' he said blankly.

XII

Alexander Helios was just emerging from the *calidarium* of the Baths of Antonius, in a billow of steam and swathed in towels, when Vitellius found him. A group of Alexander's usual followers were also in attendance. He gestured for Vitellius to join them as they strode across the marble of the lofty central hall, through an archway and out into the open air *frigidarium*. The group threw off their towels and plunged into the cool waters of the great pool and started to swim lazy lengths, leaving Vitellius waiting impatiently by the steps. After some minutes, Alexander emerged and was wrapped in a fresh robe by an attendant. He spoke a few light words to his friends on the tiresome need to discuss affairs of state, and they hung back while he walked Vitellius through a long hall until they emerged into the peace and order of a *peristyle* garden court. They found a secluded bench and sat down.

'So, Vitellius, how did dear Caesarion respond to my proposal?'

'Not how I would have wished, Dictator. He absolutely refused to give his support under any conditions. His manner was, if I may observe, most insulting to me personally — which I could bear — but what he implied about your noble self ...' He trailed off, looking like a man whose sensibilities would only be further offended if he was asked to relate any details.

Alexander's handsome features darkened and his eyes narrowed. 'I see. This is not good, Vitellius. You led me to believe he would accept my new proposals.'

'I regret I was wrong, Dictator,' Vitellius admitted simply, looking Alexander squarely in the face. 'Perhaps I let my desire for an amicable conclusion cloud my judgement.'

For a moment, Alexander regarded him intently, and it was uncertain what way his mood would take him. Then he gave a brief, good-humoured chuckle. 'That is what I like about you, Vitellius.

There is no pretence. When you make a mistake you admit it, and accept the responsibility. And when you have something hard to tell me, you do not shirk the task. In my position all I seem to meet are

those who tell me what they think I want to hear, and apparently lead totally blameless personal lives.'

'You are too kind, Dictator, but I regret there is more to tell. It was only an impression I gained, mind, nothing that was actually said ... '

'Well?'

'I fear Ptolemy Caesar intends to gather support in the senate and oppose you openly.'

Anger swiftly replaced amusement. 'That would be a step too far,'

Alexander spat. 'I have tolerated Caesarion while he confined himself to trivial matters and kept our disagreements private. I would let him be if he kept his unsettling stories and foolish ideas to himself. But this is too much.' He was silent in thought for several minutes. Then he took a deep breath, as though he had come to a difficult decision.

'All right, Vitellius. If it must be done, then it must be today, as we discussed.'

'I shall put the matter in hand immediately, Dictator. It will be done within hours. Remember, this will be turned to your advantage.'

'Yes, I know. But I had hoped with Caesarion ...' He shook his head almost in sorrow. 'But such is life. By the by, is there any news of my sister's progress?'

'As far as I know, she will arrive on time, Dictator. I have received no reports of any ... incident to cause her delay.'

'Oh well, it was only a long chance that Fabio might find opportunity to use what we sent him. We must simply rely on our principal plan, that is all. A pity. It would have been so much simpler otherwise.'

Alexander bowed his head for a moment, as though suddenly weary. 'My, but these are weighty decisions to bear.'

'It is said that the crown weighs heavy on the head that rules.'

'A crown? I have only worn a laurel crown, and that was not heavy

— and a man stood behind me saying: remember you are mortal.

That was no true crown.'

'No, Dictator, I did not mean that sort of crown. I meant one such as the old kings of Rome wore, and those of Egypt. A crown which marks divine power, as it is your destiny to wear.'

'But the people must want it too, Vitellius, you know that.'

'The moment will come, Dictator. Soon.'

'Hi, Doctor, where've you got to now?' Peri enquired. 'Say, this looks like a pretty weird place.'

The description was not unkind. As Peri could see through the hidden camera, Themos's workroom closely resembled the den of an eccentric alchemist. Under a ceiling hung with many oil lamps, the benches and shelves that ranged the walls were cluttered with an irregular jumble of artifacts that told of their owner's wide range of interests. One stack of shelves spilled over with both scrolls and fully bound books. Another held unidentifiable biological specimens floating in preserving jars. On a bench was an impressive array of jars, flasks and pipes resembling a miniature chemical factory. Hung on a clear section of wall was a full set of wooden geometric templates and something Peri tentatively decided might be a large astrolabe. Beside these tools were pinned a star chart and a world map. As the Doctor turned, the camera revealed the long tube of a refracting telescope, mounted on a tripod, that was sitting in a corner.

Sorry, Galileo, you're too late this time, Peri thought.

Themos himself could be seen scrabbling about on his littered central worktable, as though searching for something. The Doctor raised his hand, ostensibly to scratch his nose, and under cover of which said: 'This is the house of Themos of Persalus, and he has brought me back here to show me proof of something rather disturbing, if it's true.'

'So who is this guy? Rome's first research scientist?'

'A philosopher of natural phenomena — weren't you paying attention earlier?'

'Sorry, I just had these tomb-robbers to deal with — '

'What! Peri, are you all right?' For a moment, the tenderness that the Doctor seemed to hide beneath his superior mannerisms was revealed, and Peri sensed the true depth of his concern.

'Oh sure,' she responded, dimissing the matter lightly. 'I chased them

off, no problem. The thing is, I overheard one say that Cleopatra's coffin had been taken out of the tomb a month ago. But we know all the seals were still in place when we arrived, and they didn't look like they were only a month old, did they?'

'Hmm, strange. Themos told me the same thing. We may have to look into that later. Meanwhile, I want to see what he has discovered.'

'Is it important?'

'Only the end of the world.'

'Oh.'

Themos had found the papers he had been searching for, and had laid them out for the Doctor to examine. 'You have no idea what a relief it is to find an intelligent listener these days,' he was muttering, half to himself. 'I have tried to alert my fellows to what I have found, but they wouldn't take any notice. That is the price of individualism and pride, I suppose.' He appeared disconsolate, but at least the walk from the Brown Bear had cleared his head. He perched himself on a high stool.

'Now,' he continued, in lecturing tones, 'with the aid of the new magnifying tube,' he waved at the telescope, 'which I had obtained a few months ago, I had hoped to improve on some of the observations made by those in the past — Hipparchus of Nicaea, for instance —

but my problems first began when I attempted to duplicate the quite elementary experiment first performed by Eratosthenes of Alexandria some, oh, two and a half centuries ago, whereby he calculated the circumference of the Earth by comparing the changing angles of incidence of the sun's rays in different locations.' He paused, frowning, and looked doubtfully at the Doctor. 'You are aware, I trust, that the Earth is a spherical body?'

'I am,' replied the Doctor, with the slightest hint of a smile.

'Good, good. Anyway, I repeated the observations and compared them with the original results — and they were quite *different*.'

'Observational error?' suggested the Doctor.

Themos glowered at him. 'I was most careful, and checked them repeatedly. No. The inescapable conclusion, according to my figures, is that the distance between the Earth and the sun is diminishing.' He

looked both triumphant and frightened by his own words.

'But surely, the apparent size of the sun would therefore be increasing.'

'Ah, I see you are a sound reasoner, Doktor. But self-evidently, it is not the case. What do you deduce from that, eh?'

'That the guy's loopy?' suggested Peri in the Doctor's ear.

'That the sun itself is becoming smaller?' ventured the Doctor aloud.

'Precisely. Now do you see our peril. Either the sun will shrink until it is extinguished altogether, or it will strike the Earth and all will be burnt to a cinder!'

There was an awkward silence, but before the Doctor could respond, Themos continued. 'I have proof that some effects of this change are already making themselves felt. Would you care to examine the contents of the jars on the lower shelf over there?' He indicated the large glass specimen containers.

The Doctor went over and inspected them carefully.

The camera medallion swung close to the jars, giving Peri a more detailed view of their contents than she would have wished. 'Urghh!'

she exclaimed. 'What are those?' They were nightmare shapes of chimerical and distorted creatures. There was a two-headed snake, a rat with large translucent insect wings, a mongoose with three pairs of legs and a fish with the claws of a crab. Themos explained.

'These are the best specimens I could afford to buy from the traders. Others can outbid me; the Dictator has a fine collection, I understand.'

'There is no doubt these are genuine?' asked the Doctor.

Themos looked puzzled. 'Where have you been living these past few years, Doktor? Of course they are genuine. The point I was making was: where do you think they all came from?'

'The East?' he ventured cautiously.

'Exactly. At least, as far East as men dare to travel — or are allowed to travel. And why are these things, simply part of travellers'

tales for so many years, now to be found in such relative abundance?'

'What,' asked the Doctor carefully, 'do you believe happened in the East?'

Themos sagged a little. The enthusiasm that had sustained him whilst expounding his theories seemed to be fading. 'What indeed?

There are so many stories, and much that is still hidden, both by circumstance and ... intent, but I believe it has something to do with the changing position of the sun. There is a rumour that a great darkness has fallen over the East. The effect is certainly clear. Life has departed many lands, and what is left is distorted as you see. And what has happened there will soon affect us.' He smiled grimly. 'You know, Doktor, I had hoped, when the end came, to be sufficiently drunk not to care, but sufficiently sober to observe the process, which I suspect will be fascinating, but perhaps a little ... uncomfortable towards its final stages' He tapped a conspiratorial finger to his nose.

'I have been practising for the event, but, I haven't quite got it right.'

The Doctor stepped forward and helped the little man into a more comfortable chair in the corner. '... had thought of asking the Oracle when the world will end, but I'm not certain I want to know.' Themos appeared to be falling asleep.

'How can you ask it?' demanded the Doctor. He had been wanting to find out more about the mysterious Oracle for some time, but couldn't swing the discussion round to it.

'The usual way ... Go to the temple ... '

'It's in Rome now?'

'... course ... half a year here, half in ... Alexandria ...' And Themos fell into wine-assisted sleep.

'Wow,' exclaimed Peri over the earpiece, as the Doctor covered Themos with his cloak. 'Well, this puts a whole new slant on things, doesn't it. Do you think whatever has happened to us has anything to do with these freaky creatures and the — whatever has happened out East?'

'Almost certainly,' the Doctor responded, in his indifferently sarcastic tone which always infuriated Peri.

'And? Is that all? Can't you be a tad more specific?'

'I have an idea, but I don't want to talk about it just yet.'

'Does this mean I'm not going to like it?'

'Peri, I really don't know what you'd think. Just try to be patient.

Please?'

'Okay, okay. So, what are you going to do now?'

'Let Themos sleep it off, then persuade him to take me to see this Oracle.'

'Well, it sure sounds like the place to go for all the answers.'

'Meanwhile, you are going to. explain about these tomb-robbers ...'

Peri gave a condensed account of her deception, which amused even the Doctor, in his dry way. But one point did bother him.

'Peri, how long were you outside the TARDIS to arrange all this?

Has the transformation proceeded further?'

'Like I said, I can handle a few more feathers. I'm okay.'

'Is that all?'

'Well, I've definitely got wings growing, and I'd better be careful putting my feet up, 'cos there are sort of little claws growing out of the back of my heels. You know, like birds have to hold onto branches properly — .'

'Oh, Peri' There was a strong note of unease in his manner now.

'No, it's okay, really. I decided not to let it bother me, and to stay in control, at least mentally. I think it's sort of my way, symbolically, of getting back at them on Varos for what they did, and how they made me feel. Proving myself to myself, you might say.' She sighed. The memory would not go away. 'Doctor, I was so scared then ... ' Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. 'When I was under that machine, I

... lost control ... and had an accident ... like a kid ...'

There was a long pause.

'Peri, perhaps I should come back — .'

'Hell no, Doctor,' she replied sharply, her confidence and enthusiasm returning with a rush, now her confession was made.

'You've gotta stay out there and sort things out.' She chuckled. 'Like you always do. I'm okay. In fact, I'm getting curious about this change thing. Looking at it another way, it's quite an experience. I mean, life-swapping just doesn't come close. As long as you know you can get back to normal afterwards.' She suddenly sounded plaintive. 'I will get back to normal again, won't I?'

'Yes, you will return to normal, as soon as we can regain our link with the Eye of Harmony. But don't get carried away with your present state. Remember, it is not natural to you, but partially the product of your subconscious mind.'

'I will, Doctor. Like I said, don't worry about me, I'm feeling fine.'

The courtyard garden was grander than Ptolemy's own, but then, Agricola's family had always been wealthy. Agricola's mother had greeted him as always with dignified composure. And, after a few moments' polite exchange of trivialities, she said, as she almost always did when the weather was fine: 'Lucius is in the garden.' And a servant led Ptolemy along the familiar passage and he emerged into lavender and thyme scented peace and tranquillity.

Agricola was there in his usual shaded chair, and beside it, another chair had been set in anticipation of his coming. And, as always, Agricola rose to greet him with a sort of child-like amazement at seeing him. He moved a little stiffly, and he held his left arm crooked at a slightly odd angle. There was a white streak in his hair and a noticeable scar marked one side of his forehead. He looked older than Ptolemy, although he was in fact a few years younger.

Cooled wine was brought out to them, and they talked.

It was about inconsequential things, mostly. The state of the garden, the latest performances on the sporting fields, the new play at the theatre. Occasionally they talked about the past, but only those few months before they reached India. Ptolemy took pains never to mention anything about their journey up the river — or what came beyond that.

And after an hour, or maybe two, if it had been one of Agricola's better days, Ptolemy would take his leave. His old friend would bid him farewell in a hearty, but slightly vague fashion. And Ptolemy would walk away with a rigid step.

It was Ptolemy's regular habit to visit thus, usually the day after *nundinum*: the traditional market every eighth day.

It was also his penance.

It had been his fault.

Peri watched the monitor which still showed Themos's workroom.

The Doctor was looking curiously about the clutter of antique scientific instruments, whilst he waited for their owner to sleep off his liquid lunch.

But Peri was thinking about what she had said to the Doctor. She had admitted to one of the most fearful and humiliating moments of her life. Now, how do I feel? she asked herself honestly. Well, pretty good, all things considered. Okay, now, have I got the guts to see it through and go *all* the way? Maybe. What have I got to lose —

except my nerve? The Doctor said to be careful. Yeah, but I really do feel good. This time, I'm in control. If I want to, I can do it.

She looked down at herself and the patches of feathers that mottled her body. They had certainly spread while she had been outside, but they felt okay, just warm and soft. She ran a hand through her hair.

Yes, there were a few long feathers growing out of her scalp now.

She suddenly giggled. What was the right combination of shampoo and conditioner for them? she wondered.

And then she decided.

She walked over to the door and stepped outside.

XIII

The lowering afternoon sun was tinting the front of the Temple of the Oracle cream and gold, by the time the Doctor and Themos joined the tail of the queue shuffling into the building.

'Now that looks really Egyptian,' Peri commented over the comm-link.

The approach to the temple was flanked by opposing rows of crouching stone lions set on heavy plinths. Its entrance arch was formed by distinctive square section tapering pylons, and set either side were two massive seated figures of Antony and Cleopatra in

Egyptian dress. They reminded Peri of the colossi before the Great Temple at Abu-Simbel, which she had once seen while on holiday.

'Mere effect,' murmured the Doctor dismissively. 'The resurrection of dated styles, no doubt to remind the Romans of the origin of the Oracle.'

Slowly, they passed through the entrance into an open court running through a veritable forest of imposing columns. Bored looking guards watched the column of visitors as they edged forward.

They were passed by a steady trickle of those leaving, presumably after having communed with the Oracle. Peri looked for signs of mystic enlightenment on their faces but couldn't see any.

There was a shallow metal bowl set on a tripod stand beside the steps leading into the next section of the temple, and it was half filled with coins. 'It is not compulsory,' whispered Themos, digging out some small change from his pouch and dropping it into the bowl, 'but it is expected.'

'A fine distinction I will not quibble over,' replied the Doctor dryly, adding a token coin of his own to the collection.

'It is far cheaper than the purchase of a ticket to ask the Oracle a direct question. Though I'm afraid, Doktor, that we shall not be allowed very close to the Oracle itself.'

Themos was right. After traversing a *hypostyle* hall, ranked with yet more columns, those people in the queue with tickets were separated from the rest into their own, smaller file. They all passed between heavily studded and ornamented double doors and entered the sanctuary chamber containing the Oracle. The ticket holders were ushered on through gates in a latticework screen and into the centre of the chamber, whilst the rest had to circle the chamber's walls, peering between columns and fretted and scrolled panels.

'Can you see anything, Doctor? Because I sure can't,' Peri exclaimed with annoyance.

Several pans bearing smouldering incense were dotted about the inner chamber, filling the air with a haze of blue smoke. What had to be the Oracle itself was further screened by long, gauzy curtains hanging in graceful folds from the ceiling. The Doctor watched with intense frustration as a figure in priestly robes approached one of the petitioners and the man gave his question in muted tones. The priest

then passed through the curtains and appeared to rest his hands on what might have been a table and bow his head. There was something mounted on the centre of the table, which glittered like metal or glass, but the details were maddeningly indistinct. After a minute, the priest straightened up and returned through the curtains to the questioner.

He spoke to him quietly for some moments, the man's face expressing surprise then puzzlement. At length, he bowed to the priest and left the chamber.

The Doctor and Themos continued around the perimeter, but failed to get any clearer view of the Oracle.

'You must pay for a ticket to get any closer,' said Themos, 'or else join the classes of the new mechanical artisans, whose work has been so greatly influenced by its revelations.' A gong was sounded. 'Ah, that is all the public access time allowed for today. Later the officials and artisans will come and ask their questions in private. Meanwhile, we must leave, I'm afraid.'

The remaining onlookers were being ushered out of the chamber and back down the hallway, carrying a scowling and frustrated Doctor with them.

There was a sudden commotion. A large, impatient man in richly cut robes was trying to force his way through the departing crowd towards the Oracle chamber. 'I must see the Oracle now!' he kept saying urgently. He pushed a woman aside in his haste and she slipped and fell, dragging somebody else over with her. A medley of angry voices grew and fists were waved. The guards closed in to try to restore order. For a moment, all eyes were turned to watch them.

Then Themos heard the Doctor whisper quickly in his ear: 'Hope to see you tomorrow; don't look round.' And he was gone.

On the TARDIS monitor, Peri watched columns rush past the quickly moving camera, then a small, stout door open, revealing a long, dimly lit passage. 'Doctor! Are you sure this is a good idea?' He did not reply.

The passage had several doors leading off it. The Doctor moved down the line, pausing to listen at each one, until he reached almost the last one, which he opened carefully. The room beyond was small and of uncertain purpose. It had a stone bench on one side, with the carving of a bull's head superimposed over a concentric design on the facing wall. There was a second door, locked by heavy bolts, opposite the one the Doctor had entered by. Silently, the Doctor crossed over to it

and pressed his ear to the woodwork. He realized there was a small sliding panel at eye level. Gently, he eased it back a couple of inches and peered out. After a moment, apparently satisfied with what he saw, he slid it closed again and sat down composedly on the bench.

'Well I hope you know what you're doing,' came Peri's aggrieved tones in his earpiece.

'I have to get a closer look at this Oracle somehow, preferably without priests as intermediaries. This room is one of a row that open onto the Oracle chamber. I noticed these doors earlier, they're probably for the use of special petitioners to the Oracle. All I have to do is stay here until it's quiet tonight, then take a look at the Oracle undisturbed.'

'You hope.'

'Actually, I thought I took advantage of the opportunity chance provided rather well.'

'And how do you propose to get out again?'

'If necessary, I'll simply wait until the public come in again tomorrow and slip out with them.'

'Doctor, it's never that easy.'

'But it's worth the risk to find out what this Oracle is. At first I thought Themos was talking about some mystic figure in a trance, like the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. But there is clearly some sort of artifact installed here that the priests consult. If this is the source of the information on advanced technology these people are getting, then I must take a closer look at it.'

'And then?'

'That will depend on what I find behind the curtains.'

Peri sighed heavily. 'Have it your own way, Doctor. But please take care — otherwise I'll have to come and rescue you.'

'In your present unstable condition that would be most unwise.'

'You never know, Doctor,' Peri replied enigmatically.

For nearly an hour after the public had left, the Doctor heard only the sounds of the priests and attendants clearing away after them (there was a distant rush of coinage which told of the offerings being

removed for counting). For a while, there was only the distant, intermittent tramp of guards' boots. Then came the sound of a group of people approaching, and the doors to the chamber were opened again and the group of artisans Themos had told him about entered.

He observed them cautiously through the panel. They seemed less in awe of the Oracle than the general public had been, and he could see them approaching it directly, without the intervention of a priest, though no doubt these were in attendance but outside his limited field of view. But he still could not make out any further details about whatever it was behind the curtains. He strained to hear what the artisans, engineers and proto-scientists were saying, but they seemed to huddle in small groups amongst themselves, discussing their thoughts in excited whispers. The Doctor recognized the signs of inter-disciplinary rivalry, which left him no better informed than before. The group stayed for nearly two hours.

Finally, there came the sound of departing feet, the lights in the chamber were extinguished and the heavy doors closed.

The Doctor beamed with self-satisfaction in the darkness as he heard the lock turn. A few moments later, he heard the door at the end of the corridor also being locked. Still, he waited another ten minutes to be sure, then prepared to move. He fished out a pencil torch from his belt pouch and called Peri to alert her.

She didn't answer the first time, and it took three more calls before her voice sounded in his ear. She sounded breathless and so clearly bursting with excitement over something, that the Doctor asked curiously, and not a little anxiously: 'Peri, are you all right?'

'Fine, Doctor. Just great, really wonderful, fantastic!' She was gushing with elation, her words tumbling over themselves.

'Calm down, for goodness sake. Now, tell me what's happened?'

'Doctor — I can *fly!* '

Just half an hour before, Peri had stood in front of her mirror and known the change was complete.

It wasn't what she saw, she decided, it was more how she felt inside. Her senses were tingling, and she felt more alert, more aware of herself than she could recall. She realized dimly that her mind must have adjusted in keeping with the purely physical changes in her body. It had taken time at first, but now she was more in sync with

herself than she had ever been. She felt vigorous, wired-in, very capable and tremendously powerful. It was as though there was a new potential within her that was just waiting to be fulfilled.

Most of her body was covered with fine dark feathers now, except for her face, the palms of her hands and soles of her feet, and this seemed entirely right and proper. Her hair had become a fine crest of feathers, neatly growing back from a sharp peak on her forehead to trail down between her shoulders. Strong talons now tipped her fingers and toes, with those extra spur-like claws extending down from her heels. Her toes also seemed longer and more flexible, though not disproportionately so. I sure could get a good grip on something now, she thought. She had been wondering if she would grow a tail, and suspecting it might make sitting down a problem. But as it transpired, the thicker growths down her calves and ankles had developed into small, extendable fan-like wings, which would obviously serve the same function — at least in theory.

But her most striking feature was her wings. They were elegantly shaped, like the best angels' wings as improbably portrayed on films, except in a darker tint. She felt the delicious play of unsuspected muscles across her shoulders and back as they smoothly unfolded and extended. Fully spread they spanned a good sixteen feet, she estimated. She reached out and brushed the leading edge of one wing, amazed by the sensation of touching a part of her that had not existed a few hours before. But it all seemed perfectly normal at the same time, and she knew some fold of her brain must have opened up or developed to manage these new additions. Peri stroked the finely graded and ordered feathers, realizing she must read up on all the proper names for them. She did remember that the long feathers that ran to the tips were called primaries, and the shorter, broader ones were the secondaries. And what about grooming, she suddenly wondered? Birds do it all the time, but they use their beaks. Will a hair brush do instead?

She dissolved into a helpless fit of giggles. This was all so weird, practically macabre — and yet, it was simply the way things were.

And she had won her bet with herself. She was laughing in circumstances she would never have dreamed it possible, and had symbolically re-adjusted the balance of the past. Varos 1, Peri 1 — at last.

Experimentally, she beat her wings, and felt the exciting flow of air across their surfaces, a sensation that would have been quite

meaningless a short time ago. It was a pity she was too big to actually fly, but aerodynamically she knew it would not work, however pleasingly shaped her wings were. She beat them a little harder, and was surprised at the surge of power they seemed to give. She had definitely felt the lift. Perhaps she might be able to glide a little, but she'd need more room to find out.

She went through to the control room and checked that all was still quiet at the Doctor's end, then stepped out into the ante-chamber —

and was surprised to find how brightly lit it seemed. She paused, thoughtfully. Of course, her eyes had adjusted to the generally low levels of improvised lighting over the hours; there was only one glow blob in the chamber by the stairs, yet its soft light seemed to flood the whole space. What have I got, she wondered — owl's eyes? For that matter, all her senses did seem to be sharpened. Maybe it would come in handy. Okay! Varos 1, Peri 2.

Hesitantly, with her wings extended, she tried a little jump off the lower steps of the stairway. It went well, and she managed a modest glide of a few yards. She repeated the experiment several times, gaining confidence and a sense of balance. I can probably do better than this, she thought, but I'll need more space. She checked on the Doctor again, then ran eagerly up the stairs, feeling strangely exhilarated and light-footed. She reached the clear space under the centre of the dome and looked about her, automatically flexing her wings to stretch them as she did so, choosing her most suitable launching point. Yes, that heavy chest of drawers thing would do.

Peri stepped towards it on her toes, her mind focused simply on reaching its top, her wings beating in anticipation. Unconsciously she reached out towards it. Her wings beat harder. She felt her feet leave the ground. There was a moment of dizziness mingled with stark disbelief — and then she was flying.

She rose up into the air on steadily, almost lazily beating wings, acutely aware of the powerful surges of air they generated, aware of the delicate flutterings of her leg winglets that seemed to be keeping her in balance, aware of the jumble of the treasure chamber below her, now visible from an unexpected angle, and of the arching vault just above her wingtips. But most of all, she was aware Ithat flying was totally impossible. This was probably, she reflected, not a wise thought to have, when manifestly she was doing that very thing, because the ground below was undoubtedly hard, and if she convinced herself it actually was impossible for her to be flying, she

might suddenly not be. It would be bad timing to return to reality, especially when the alternative felt so good. On the other hand, she thought, reality might just prove to be out to a very long lunch.

She circled the room, drifting over the stacked funereal goods, the air from her wings raising occasional puffs of dust. She looked at the ladder leading up to the hole the Doctor had cut in the dome. Through there was the way out into the open sky, and it seemed to call to her.

That was somewhere she could really stretch her wings. Yeah, why not, go to it! Final score: Varos 1, Peri 10!

Then she thought of the Doctor, and the thought seemed quite literally to bring her down to earth. She landed gently, her wings folding neatly and smoothly together across her back. This she had to tell him about!

She ran down the stairs back towards the TARDIS. She heard his voice calling her as she slipped in through the doorway.

'Oh, Peri, what have you done?' was the Doctor's gentle reproach after he had heard her story. He was silent for several moments.

'But, Doctor, I feel wonderful. Really great. I mean, I tried parascending once, but there's no comparison. To actually fly yourself, well, it's ... You just can't describe it. You had to be there, you know?'

'I know. That's the problem. This is not a natural ability for your proper body form.'

'But why shouldn't I enjoy it while I can?'

'Because you might get to like it too much. There may be ...

complications afterward.'

'But you still think I'll get back to normal when everything's sorted out, don't you?'

'Physically, there is every reason to suppose you will; this is not the same as Varos. But that is only half the problem. Oh, well. It's too late now We'll just have to cross that bridge when the time comes.'

'But I still want to know how I can fly. I know it shouldn't be possible.'

'Well, it's possible you are being aided psycho-kinetically.'

'You mean levitation and so on? But I've never been able to do anything like that.'

'Normally not. But here it is clearly a different matter. Remember, there is still that trace energy field I detected to be accounted for. You may, subconsciously, be tapping into that for power. Or perhaps, in your unstable condition, you have unknowingly developed the ability to complement the nature of your alternate form. The effect operates unconsciously as you flap your wings, making it appear they are solely responsible. Still, it would probably not be a good idea to attempt flying without using them. Whatever the method, I wish you hadn't begun this — .'

'I've got that message now, thank you, Doctor. But you know, this does make it seem as though there's something odd about this place

— I mean, odder than your average parallel timeline, of course.'

'That had already become apparent. Which is all the more reason why I must take a closer look at the Oracle. It may hold valuable clues. I think it's quiet enough now.'

The Doctor turned on his pencil torch, and carefully slid back the door bolts. The door opened quietly, revealing a dark and still Oracle chamber. He walked softly round the passage between the wall and the latticework screen until he came to the gateway. It was only latched closed. Evidently, those responsible for the Oracle thought the outer doors and guards sufficient security. It was also unlikely that anyone would dare attempt to steal such a revered and unique item. He opened the gate and padded across the inner sanctuary to the curtains that veiled the Oracle. As he got closer, he could make out a few coloured lights glowing faintly in the darkness behind the curtains.

The Doctor drew a fold of material aside and shone his torch onto the Oracle.

'I don't believe it!' exclaimed Peri, seeing the image that flashed up on the monitor.

The Oracle of Alexandria was an exact replica of the TARDIS's console unit.

XIV

'And her arms,' said Decius, once again, in disbelieving tones. 'Was it

... mould?' His eyes were wide and glassy with shock and rough wine. He took another swig from his mug, trying to drown both the terrible memory of what he had seen, and the taste of the previous mouthful.

The *Cavum*, as it was colloquially known, made the *tabernae* of the Brown Bear look almost palatial — but then, anything known as the

'Hole' was likely to do that. It was presently situated in a half-cellar tucked in amongst the storehouses near the river, though its location had been known to switch at short notice. It was dark, dingy and whatever had formerly been stored in it before its most recent incarnation had left a lingering, unidentifiable odour. Its customers did not complain. It was always open, and if you could pay, and were not choosy about quality, you could dunk until you were sick or insensible or both. But then, the Hole was not particular about its customers either, as long as they had nothing to do with the authorities. In fact, Cassodorus's gang actually raised the tone of the place with every drink they downed. And they had been doing so steadily for hour after hour.

Behind the trestle and plank table in the corner that served as a counter, Pallius shook his head sadly. He'd seen some frightened people in his time (on certain unspecified occasions, he'd actually been the last person to see them ever again) but this crowd were the worst. Whatever had shocked them, the drink was hardly touching it, though they were doing their best to put that right. And whatever it was, they'd made it quite clear they didn't want to talk about it, except amongst themselves, in nervous, anguished whispers. This was perfectly all right with Pallius, who understood that many of his clientele had their little secrets, and he made sure he was seen to scrupulously respect their privacy, whilst unobtrusively keeping his ears open for any useful pieces of information he might, quite inadvertently, overhear. In fact, he had overheard a few words of what Cassodorus's gang were muttering to each other — and had decided that, this time, he didn't want to hear any more.

Back at the table, Strabo's huge head was pillowed in his arms, which were folded across the drink-stained wood before him. 'It were the Evil Eye, Cass,' he moaned, like a frightened child. 'I saw it an'

she saw me with it ... And now I'm going to die ... '

Cassodorus reached out and patted his head vaguely. 'It's all right, lad. You're not going to die. We're not going to let any ... heathen Egyptian Queen's spirit get in the way, are we?' He looked at the others for

support. They looked at their drinks. 'No we're not!' he said, trying to sound resolute, at least to himself. 'We'll just think it over, careful like, then ... We'll see. We're not going to let all that lovely gold and jewels and stuff go to waste sitting around in a tomb, are we?' The others looked as though they were prepared to do so, just this once. 'No we're not!' he continued firmly. 'We worked for that load of valuables. It's *ours*!'

'It's our console,' the Doctor said firmly.

'Doctor,' said Peri equally firmly over the comm-link, 'I'm sitting at our console — it can't be.'

The Doctor played his torch over the Oracle of Alexandria again.

'Then how is it that it has every modification, every customized detail that I built into it — and it even has that scratch where you dropped your coffee cup. It's not *any* Type Forty console unit, it's quite definitely ours.'

'You mean, it's an exact copy?'

'Any copy as exact as this might as well be considered identical.'

'That's just hair splitting.'

'But significant hair splitting; it might explain a lot'

'Well, when was the copy made?'

'When we were caught up in the energy flux tube, probably.' He sniffed, disconsolately. 'And I rather suspect, this is not the only thing that has been copied.'

'But how has it remained functioning all this time?'

'Its internal power packs were obviously not drained like ours were, and none of its main control functions are operative' He circled the console, checking the instrument settings. 'All that's working is the general memory bank and the telepathic induction circuits —

unfortunately, on a reciprocal feedback setting. That could explain its success as a font of all wisdom.'

Peri thought of the uncounted gigabytes of information stored in the memory units, all accessible by direct mental link to whoever was close enough and intelligent enough to understand it. Probably, most

of it had meant nothing to them, but what they had understood they had made use of. And how!

The Doctor was working the controls, and Peri saw information flash across one of the displays faster than she could read it. 'I'm trying to find out what it has been telling them recently about power generation. It may prove useful to know — oh, that's most unfortunate!'

'What?'

'They've found out about the Tragellan method'

'Is that bad?'

'It's a means of separating isotopes of elements that are otherwise chemically identical, without the cumbersome gaseous diffusion process.'

'So, they're getting into advanced chemistry. What's the problem?'

'The problem is they are applying it to uranium to enrich the proportion of isotope 235.'

'You mean they're trying to build an atomic power plant!'

'No. I mean for the past two years, according to the records, the Romans have been learning how to build an atomic bomb!'

Peri was shocked into silence.

The Doctor continued matter-of-factly: 'Interestingly, the Alexandrians do not seem to have realized what the Romans are doing, as they haven't pursued that path of enquiry. They seem to be more interested in aeronautics.'

Peri found her voice. 'But it's not possible, surely?'

The Doctor's tone hardened. 'I'm afraid it is. Simple atomic weapons would be well within their capabilities, with the help the console has been giving them. Of course, they'd be rather crude devices with a low explosive yield, say only a few thousand kilotons

... '

'But that's a horrible thought!'

'Unfortunately, horrible or not, it has happened. The question is: how far have they got?'

And then came the sound of feet in the hall outside. A lock turned and the double doors were thrown open.

Inconvenient and pitiless electric light flooded the chamber, illuminating the Doctor in mid-stride as he sprinted for the gate in the latticework screen wall.

On the jerking monitor image, Peri got an impression of a small group standing in the doorway. One was a handsome, imperious man in fine robes, while standing beside him was an officer wearing the plumed helmet and breastplate of the Praetorian Guard, with a knot of soldiers at his back. There was one addition to their traditional costume, she realized. They were carrying rifles.

The Doctor skidded to a halt as he realized they were blocking his escape and looked about him desperately for some alternative. Peri heard two voices cry: 'Spy!' and 'Assassin!' almost simultaneously, and a shot rang out. The bullet ricocheted off a column and whined back across the chamber like an angry bee, making everybody duck.

'No firing!' shouted the robed man in a commanding voice. 'Don't risk the Oracle!' The Doctor took cover behind the console like a rabbit seeking its burrow.

'Swords only!' ordered the officer. 'Take him alive if you can.' He turned to the robed man. 'Please stand back, Dictator, he may be armed!'

'Can't we talk about this?' the Doctor called out hopefully from behind the curtains. But there was no time for talking. The soldiers, keen to impress their superiors, rushed forward, swords at the ready.

Almost by reflex, the Doctor picked up one of the shallow incense pans and threw it at the leading man, who disappeared in a choking, blinding cloud of dust and ash. The second man cut at the Doctor through the curtain, but his sword tangled in the flimsy, clinging material. The Doctor sprang forward, tore down the length of curtain, twisted it about the surprised guard then pulled, jerking the man off his feet.

The third guard, less ambitious or more cautious than the first two, held back for a moment. The Doctor picked up another incense pan and threw the contents at him, then swung the pan round to connect

with the helmet of the second guard, who had freed himself from the curtain. It made a noise like a gong and dropped the man to the floor again. The third guard lunged forward, swinging his sword, only to have it glance off the curved pan that the Doctor now held as an improvised shield.

The Dictator began to laugh.

Blow after blow rained down on the pan, eventually knocking it from the Doctor's hands. He leaped back between the draperies around the Oracle, and, as the third guard followed, pulled them down over his head and gave him a helpful kick that sent him sprawling. The Doctor turned to run, only to be confronted by the first guard, who, still sneezing and rubbing the dust from his eyes, was coming at him again. Desperately, the Doctor snatched up a length of tasselled cord that had come down with the draperies, and flicked the heavy knotted end at the man's eyes, making him flinch back. He flicked it stingingly at his bare shins, then at his face again.

The guard cut wildly at the cord. His training had not prepared him for fighting with religious soft furnishings.

In the TARDIS, Peri watched the madcap fight in a helpless agony of frustration, sick with fear and dreading what seemed its inevitable conclusion. She clutched fiercely at the edge of the console, unaware that her talons were gouging its surface.

In the temple, the guard officer exclaimed disparagingly: 'What man is this who fights with such weapons?'

'I really have no choice!' the Doctor riposted, between whips of his curtain cord, sounding understandably aggrieved.

'Hold!' the Dictator called out. 'Guards, leave him be, by my order!'

The dishevelled guards slowly drew back from the Doctor, leaving him swinging his length of curtain cord uncertainly, his eyes darting about seeking another way out. There was none.

Now,' continued the Dictator in amused tones, turning to the guard officer. 'You do not like this man's manner of combat, Paulinus?'

Paulinus looked confused. 'It seems undignified, Dictator.

Unmanly ...' he trailed off awkwardly.

'But surprisingly effective, though, is it not? Perhaps he could give your guards a few pointers on close combat.'

'Uh, perhaps so, Dictator.' His face was flushing with embarrassment.

'I found it all most amusing — and I find so little to amuse me nowadays. Perhaps we can use this fellow as a comic turn in the Games?'

Paulinus suddenly brightened. 'Yes, Dictator.'

'Of course, we shall have to capture him first. Would you attend to that, Paulinus?' The man drew his sword and stepped forward eagerly. 'But of course,' the Dictator continued, halting him in his tracks, 'we must make this *dignified*. You don't want to engage in anything *unmanly*, do you, Paulinus? And as the fellow has amused me, we'll give him a fair chance' He turned to one of the guards. 'You, give the man your sword!' With an anxious glance at his superior, the guard edged towards the Doctor, reversed his sword, and tossed it to him. The Doctor caught it out of the air. It was a gladius: a short, double-edged sword with a heavy pommel and no guard. It was quite lethal — in the right hands.

'Now, Paulinus, I have heard of your boasts about your prowess with a sword. Let us see some of it.' Paulinus stepped forward into a half-crouch, sword extended. His expression was not pleasant.

The Doctor's thoughts raced.

He knew his life depended on flattering the Dictator's somewhat twisted sense of humour, and simply surrendering was not an option.

He knew he didn't want to kill his opponent simply for following the orders of his egotistical ruler. Unfortunately, he knew Paulinus would quite happily kill him. But most of all, he knew he wasn't that good with a sword. Of course, he had been ... once. He fumbled with the patch on his wristband that concealed the miniaturized morphic resonator, and twisted a tiny dial ...

Paulinus lunged forward and the Doctor skipped backwards, waving his sword vaguely about to keep him clear.

To the Doctor, the chamber seemed to blur and grow distant and sounds became muffled. Paulinus seemed to slow in his advance towards him, his sword moving as though it was cutting through treacle. Within the Doctor's mind a new, yet familiar, voice seemed to

say: *play a straight bat ...*

Then that was pushed aside and someone said: *offer him a jelly baby ... are you sure I can't help?*

And then: *Do move over, my dear fellow, and let me at him.* And gently but firmly, the current Doctor's personality was pushed aside and a new yet also familiar, set of reflexes superimposed themselves upon his nervous system.

All Paulinus knew was that, after a few wild, amateurish swings at him, a devil-may-care gleam had suddenly appeared in the stranger's eyes, and a mocking smile had sprung to his lips. Then his own sword was turned expertly aside, and it was his turn to retreat before a barrage of cuts and thrusts delivered with a poise and style he had never met before. The terrifying realization dawned that he was suddenly fighting for his life. Just to make it worse, with every other blow, the stranger would utter a loud: 'Haa!' for no apparent reason.

Somehow it seemed terribly unfair.

The clash of sword metal rang louder as Paulinus was forced back across the chamber until he was pressed up against the lattice screen of the inner sanctuary. Then a blow to the base of his sword from a completely unexpected angle knocked the weapon from his hand, and the stranger's sword was pressed to his throat.

'I suggest,' said the stranger, with disconcerting mildness, 'that you yield, because I really would rather not deprive the Dictator of, no doubt, a valuable officer. Now what do you say to that, hmm?' And he smiled quizzically.

'I yield,' Paulinus croaked miserably.

'Very sensible. And next time, watch your elbow — you're holding it too far out on the thrusts' And he reversed his sword and politely offered it to the amazed Paulinus.

There came a slow, appreciative round of applause. 'Splendid,'

cried the Dictator enthusiastically, 'that was really most diverting' The Doctor bowed in polite acknowledgement. The Dictator walked around him, examining him closely as though he were a new species of animal. 'You really are the most audacious rogue I have ever seen.

Who are you and where are you from?'

'I am called Doktor, your ... Highness.' He remembered the graffiti.

'A little premature, but I like the sound of it. Go on.'

'And I am a philosopher from a small isle in the Cyclades, just recently arrived in Rome.'

'A philosopher who is most capable with a sword. Not a skill commonly associated with that calling.'

'I have observed that a sharp sword cuts through the most erudite polemic, and is sometimes best countered in kind.'

The Dictator laughed heartily. 'As keen with your wits as you are with your blade, eh? And why were you skulking about in here?'

'I had heard of the wonders of the Oracle, but was unable to afford the cost of a ticket to view it more closely, nor could I obtain the right to consult it along with other, more favoured, seekers after knowledge.'

'But your curiosity got the better of you in the end?'

'Precisely, your ... Majesty.'

'There! Flattery again!' the Dictator exclaimed rhetorically, to their small audience. 'Yet, I know what he is doing and, yes, look in his eye, *he* knows that I know — but he does it anyway. Undoubtedly, the finest and slyest rogue in the city. Well, Doktor, what do you expect your clever words to win for you?'

'A pardon, perhaps?'

The Dictator was circling him again, brow furrowed thoughtfully.

'No, I don't think that would set a good example. People must not lose their respect for the Oracle and what it represents, otherwise we'll have footloose adventurers streaming in here to try their luck. No, I think I shall simply give you a chance — .'

'Oh, good.'

'A very small chance, mind you.'

'Ah ...'

'In fact, you probably won't survive, but I'm sure your death will be amusing.'

'I always aim to give satisfaction.'

The Dictator laughed again. 'By the Gods, I believe your tongue will still be spouting a day after the rest of you is cold. Now, listen my merry fellow. Tomorrow my sister arrives bringing Alexandria's finest gladiator to challenge all-comers in the arena. Seven of the best gladiators Rome has to offer are set to oppose him.'

'And you'd like me to be one of them?'

'Just so. You shall meet Gandos first — .'

'Oh, good, top billing.'

The Dictator smiled. 'We shall see if you speak so glibly *after* your encounter. Take him away, Paulinus, and see that he is made comfortable but well guarded.'

'Might I ask just one favour,' the Doctor said quickly.

'Well?'

'Might the good Paulinus here help me prepare for the fight?'

'A strange choice' The Dictator smiled at Paulinus's renewed look of discomfort. 'But why not. See that he has all that he needs, Paulinus, and that he is presented ready for the contest in the best possible condition. Now, you had better call some more guards before you escort our precious rogue to his new accommodation.'

In the TARDIS, Peri sagged over the console, feeling limp and drained after the tension of the fight.

Somehow, the Doctor had done it again. At least he had bought himself a breathing space. All through the fight and the conversation afterwards, she had been too frightened of distracting him to communicate. But now, as soon as he was alone, there would be time to plan his escape. With her new abilities, she was sure they could work something out.

When she raised her head again to look at the screen, she could see the swinging arms of marching soldiers, and beyond them a narrow street, lit by a string of electric lamps. Several carts were visible, some pulling over to let the file of guards past. She could also overhear the Doctor talking to Paulinus...

'Listen, scum,' Paulinus said angrily, 'you may have impressed *him* with your fancy words — you caught him in a good mood and played up to his fancies — but to me you're a common thief who'd be improved by having his tongue cut out, and if I hear any more of your smart talk I'll — .'

'You'll do precisely nothing,' said the Doctor, icily. 'For the next two days, my well-being is your responsibility. If anything happens to me before the fight, and the Dictator is cheated of his entertainment, who do you think he's going to blame, hmm?'

Peri was sure she could hear teeth gnashing.

'You made me look a fool!' Paulinus hissed viciously. 'You humiliated me in front of my men and Alexander!'

'Wrong; you simply met a better fighter, and it's no disgrace to lose in those circumstances. Besides, think what you can make out of it ...

'

There was a pregnant pause.

'What are you talking about?'

'Think what happens if I win against Gandos.'

'You won't win, he's the best there's ever been. I saw him fight once and — .'

'Good, you can give me some pointers on his technique.'

Paulinus laughed reluctantly. 'I'll say this for you, you've got nerve.

But I still won't be sorry to see Gandos cut you to pieces.'

'How considerate of you. Now tell me what the betting is on Gandos.'

'Huh? Well, it's all to win, of course. Few patriotic bets on the best of his opponents, but — .'

'That's very good. Anybody who bets on me will make quite a tidy sum then.'

'But you won't win.'

'Really? You didn't fare so well against me. Would you say some

points of my technique were new to you?'

'Well ... '

'And they'll be new to Gandos as well' The Doctor paused significantly. 'Now at the moment, only a few people know that. And if they are wise, they might choose to take advantage of that fact while the odds are favourable. Think also, what better way to expunge any feelings of humiliation if I should win? There would be no shame in having lost to the conqueror of the mighty Gandos then, would there? In fact, you can say what a close fight you gave me the first time round.'

Paulinus gave a distinct gasp, expressing both irritation and amazement. 'By Jupiter, he was right about your tongue! You won't need a sword, you could simply talk Gandos into cutting his own throat for you!'

A small, heavy door opened in the otherwise blank exterior wall of Ptolemy Caesar's palace, and Ptolemy himself stepped out into the narrow street that ran down by the side of his property. He closed and locked the door carefully behind him, looked up and down the deserted passage, then raised the hood of the nondescript cloak he was wearing, and walked quietly away, disappearing into the pools of shadow between the widely set lamps.

For a few seconds, nothing moved.

Then, two dark—clad figures emerged from the darkness further along the way, and stole silently after him.

XV

'The accommodation is spartan, I grant you,' acknowledged the Doctor, looking about his cell in the Praetorian guardhouse, 'but I am in no immediate danger. I have adequate, if plain food, a surprisingly good flask of wine, a basically sound bed — though straw mattresses were never my favourite — even more basic, but functional, sanitation. No, all in all, I'm quite comfortable for the present.'

'But, Doctor,' Peri was almost shouting over the comm-link, 'I can't just leave you there!'

'For the moment you must. I'm perfectly safe. In fact, I'm probably one of the best protected men in Rome.'

'But you can't be planning to fight this Gandos character?'

'I hope not, though I thought I was rather good earlier.' He made a few flourishes in the air with his hand, as though wielding an invisible sword.

'I don't know how you managed it, but you can't expect to get lucky like that twice.'

'Luck!' The Doctor sounded offended. 'That was pure skill, coupled with a moment of quick thinking. I slightly reduced the strength of the morphic field and took advantage of the instability effect to open my mind to the personality of one of my former incarnations, who was really quite good with a sword, though he had a strange taste in clothes — .'

'Look who's talking!'

The Doctor ignored her comment. 'And I allowed his reflexes temporarily to take over when swordsmanship was called for.'

'Doctor, I don't care if you can call up the shade of Zorro, or the ghost of Robin Hood to help you; I'm going to try to get you out of there!'

'No, Peri!' said the Doctor, his manner suddenly becoming serious.

'It's not a matter of cutting a few bars in a conveniently secluded window. I'm in an inner dungeon cell, and the guards have rifles, which they are quite prepared to use. Besides, you have a much more immediate and important task to perform, which will help our situation immeasurably if you succeed, and must be done under the cover of darkness. Please accept for the moment that I am quite safe, and that you can better use your unlikely new talent to ... you are sure you can really fly?'

'I told you, Doctor, I'm a natural! You're talking to somebody who really has their wings.'

'Well, please be careful. Now, are you prepared to act sensibly and not attempt any pointless heroics?'

'I guess, if you're sure you'll be okay.'

'I am. All right, this is what you're going to do. First, as a precaution, you'd better take a dose of Thal anti-radiation drug from the medicine chest ...

Ten minutes later, Peri squeezed through the hole in the pyramid wall

and stood on the temple roof, stretching her wings wide. The night air was cool if humid, and some cloud had fortuitously rolled over, blotting out the stars. If there was any moon that night, it had yet to rise, or had already set. Good, she thought, the darker the better. The only illumination came from the night-lights of the city which, despite the introduction of electricity, were feeble and scattered compared to the levels she would expect in a modern city of comparable size. To her newly sensitized eyes, though, this was quite sufficient.

With a renewed thrill of pleasure, she let her wings unfold naturally for flight. She took a few light steps forward on her toes, her wings gave three powerful beats, and the rooftop fell away beneath her as she soared into the air.

For a minute she circled the pyramid, not seeking height, but gaining confidence in flying in the open, realizing it was not simply a volume of space, but a complex fluid through which she was moving.

Even in its present placid state, she could sense the currents, eddies, updrafts and sinkers, which she would have to master. What would it be like to fly in a storm, she wondered — like surfing, perhaps?

She spiralled up until she reached the peak of the pyramid and landed just below the capstone, feeling her talons lock into the joints in the stonework. The whole city lay spread out before her. She unclipped a small device from her belt, rather like a gun with a square, stubby barrel. A display lit up, and she swung the radiation detector in slow, steady sweeps across the city and the plain beyond.

Where an atomic processing plant might have been built was problematic, depending on the level of secrecy required, and how concerned, or aware, they were of the dangers of contamination.

Unfortunately, thanks to the technical information the 'Oracle' had given them, it didn't need to be a large building, or perhaps ... An indicator on the display registered. Peri noted the range and intensity.

Somewhere out in the hills, it seemed. Well, that made sense, but it looked as though she was in for a long flight. Now she would learn how fast ... The display flashed again. There was a second source close by, within the city walls. It was compact, partially shielded, and steady. She adjusted the sensitivity until she had focused in on a building no more than half a mile from her. It looked like another pseudo-Egyptian temple.

Almost without thought, Peri launched herself into the air towards the

building, dropping away from the pyramid tomb in a long, effortless swooping glide. She soared out across the city, delighting in the sheer freedom to move as she pleased. Down below she saw carts and wagons toiling along narrow streets. Oh yes, she recalled Julius Caesar had had to ban them from the city during the daytime because of congestion; so they came at night and their clatter kept people awake. Obviously, the problem still persisted, but it didn't bother her.

As she flew lower, an unglamorous reality of ancient life intruded by way of her nostrils: the city stank! Privies, animal dung, refuse littering the streets and simply the smell of largely unwashed people en masse. Hadn't Shakespeare said something disparaging about the fickle rabble in *Julius Caesar*: they 'threw up their sweaty nightcaps', and had 'stinking breath'? Well, he had that right, she decided.

Peri touched down lightly on the roof of the temple just behind the towering block of the entrance arch. It seemed to be laid out like the Oracle temple, with a series of courts and halls running down a central axis to the sanctuary itself. She took another reading with the detector and started off across the flat stone slabs, jumping lightly down, wings spread, over the steps between the different levels. The detector showed she was almost on top of the source, and she saw light filtering through pierced vertical slabs of stone that filled the gap between two roof levels. A clearstory, she thought it was called, providing light and ventilation for large chambers or inner rooms.

She squatted down and peered through the slotted stonework.

She was looking down onto a spacious chamber. On a raised dais at one end was a statue of the bull-god Serapis.

In the middle of the chamber, set within a ring of torches, was a massive stone sarcophagus; intricately carved along its sides, and with its heavy lid removed and resting against a far wall. Inside the sarcophagus was a golden mummiform coffin in female form, adorned in the Egyptian manner. And inside that, Peri knew, would be nesting a smaller coffin, with a still smaller inside that, and inside that in turn. Finally, there would be the embalmed body itself Then she looked at the radiation detector display again.

Somewhere inside all of that was also an atomic bomb.

Then she knew whose coffin she was looking at — or rather who was *supposed* to be inside it. The implications of what was being planned suddenly fell into place in her mind, and for a moment she was

stunned by the sheer cold-blooded heartlessness of it all. The Doctor had been right, back there on the sandbanks of the Nile delta: *any form of behaviour, however ruthless, was acceptable*. Now she knew that was the literal truth. But at least she could do something about it.

The molecular cutter also hung on her belt, and now she used it to remove a section of the pierced stonework and lifted it to one side.

Cautiously, she put her head and shoulders through the gap and examined the interior of the chamber. It was gratifyingly empty and all seemed quiet. The double doors at one end were open, and she could see a section of hall beyond. Pity about the doors; still, she could not be caught like the Doctor had been, so she could afford the risk.

She edged through the gap and dropped to the floor, spreading her wings to slow her fall, landing lightly with knees flexed. I'd make one hell of a cat burglar, she thought.

The doors at the far end of the hall were shut. Fine; just stay that way for five minutes and I'll be out of here.

Peri crouched at the head end of the sarcophagus, partially shielded from the doors, leaned over its interior, and ran the detector over the coffin. Yes, that was where it was. No nest of intricately carved coffins within coffins after all. Probably no body either. But the case was certainly massive enough to hold a bomb. Fortunately, the deep outer sarcophagus was also almost deep enough to hold her as well.

She vaulted over the edge and crouched down beside the coffin.

Adjusting the cutter to a shallow setting, she scribed a hair-thin circular cut in the middle of the case, then worked a fine talon tip into the crack and lifted the slightly taper-cut plug of inlaid and gilded wood out of the way.

Just in case, she held the radiation detector over the hole before looking inside. The count rose sharply, and she was pleased she had taken precautions. She took a quick glance inside with her torch, noting the wires, levers and springs of an elaborate clockwork timing mechanism, all feeding into a thick tube with a swelling in the middle. That would hold the uranium core itself, divided into sub-critical masses, with the conventional explosive triggers either side, ready to blast the two halves of the core together to initiate a chain reaction. As the Doctor had said, it was very simple.

Peri unfastened the last item she was carrying from her belt, and quickly slipped it into the cavity as close to the core as she could manage. It was one of the spare transductor cells, specially adjusted according to the Doctor's instructions. Hopefully, it was already draining energy from the unstable uranium atoms and transmitting it back to the TARDIS.

She laid the plug of wood back into place, adjusted the cutter setting, and ran the nozzle around the joint in a straight line. Perfect.

No one would ever know it had been —

There was a click of latches from the far end of the hall and the doors started to swing open. With a snap of wings, Peri launched herself into the air and in a moment she was scrambling through the opening in the clearstory panel and out onto the roof.

She crouched in the shadows for a minute, trying to still the thump of her heart. That had been too close for comfort.

Cautiously, she peered back into the chamber. A lean man in a dark cloak with the hood thrown back, was standing silently beside the sarcophagus. His head was bowed, but it seemed familiar. She could faintly hear soft words, as though he was speaking to ... Oh. Peri remembered the three busts on the street corner, and realized who the man was. She felt acutely embarrassed, realizing she was spying on a very personal moment.

Uncomfortably she waited, wanting to replace the section she had cut out of the clearstory, but unwilling to risk Ptolemy Caesar hearing her work. Everything had gone well up to now, and she wanted to leave no trace behind to arouse any suspicion.

A flicker of unexpected motion in the chamber below caught her eye.

Two dark figures had just slipped through the doors and were creeping stealthily up behind Ptolemy. Peri saw torchlight gleam off a knife blade.

'Look out — behind you!'

She had shouted the warning automatically, without thought of its consequence. She simply could not stand by and witness such cowardly murder. Undoubtedly it saved Ptolemy's life.

He twisted round, catching the knife even as it was being thrust up

into the back of his ribs, and drove his fist into the assassin's face, sending him reeling to the floor. Ptolemy drew a knife from his own belt and faced the second man, who in an instant, reversed his knife and threw it at Ptolemy. He twisted aside, causing the knife to miss his chest, but instead bury itself in his right upper arm. Another knife appeared in the assassin's hand and he lunged towards him. Ptolemy switched his knife to his uninjured arm and met the other's rush squarely. For a moment the two merged in a swirl of dark cloaks, locked in an embrace that meant certain death for one or other of them. Yet neither uttered a sound. Then one sagged, his legs doubling awkwardly under him, and he crumpled to the floor, the haft of a knife protruding from his chest in a spreading patch of blood.

Ptolemy stood over him, swaying slightly, holding his own arm still transfixed by the thrown knife. He clasped the handle and, teeth clenched, he pulled it free — just as the first assassin staggered to his feet behind him. Ptolemy heard a sound and turned, taking a step backwards, and tripped over the fallen man's sprawling legs. His injured arm failed to brace him and his head struck the floor with a crack. The assassin drew a fresh knife and moved in for the kill —

— just as Peri dropped from the ceiling with a cry of rage.

It was perhaps ten minutes later that a suspicious watch patrol found the door guards of the Temple of Serapis dead. When the search reached the chamber containing Cleopatra's sarcophagus, they found one dead assassin, and one live one. The latter was cowering in a corner, twitching, too shocked to speak coherently. From the marks on his face and clothes, it looked as though he had been badly clawed by some unidentifiable animal.

Of Ptolemy Caesar, there was no sign.

In the Hole the drink had finally had its desired effect, taking the gang beyond fear and despair, and on to that blissful state of unreality where anything seemed possible. Even Strabo was beaming foolishly.

He was now, reasonably, sure he wasn't going to die from the evil eye, though the next morning's hangover might make him wish he had. Cassodorus was banging the table with his mug.

'So ... we know what we're going to do ... right?'

'Right!' they chorused.

'And we're not going to let ... anything stop us this time, are we lads?'

'No!'

'Then let's go!'

They staggered out into the night.

XVI

Slowly, painfully, consciousness returned to Ptolemy Caesar.

His recollections were confused at first, and, for some moments, he thought he was still lying in his own bed. But if so, he wondered sluggishly, why did it feel, well, strange? He became aware of a general unfocused sense of discomfort, which gradually condensed into a dull throbbing ache in his right arm, and a sharper pain at the back of his head. A wave of nausea swelled within, threatened to overwhelm him, then ebbed away, leaving a taste of vomit in his mouth. Why was he in pain? Had he been injured in some way? Was it morning yet? Surely he had already risen? Yes, he was certain he had. And Vitellius had called with Alexander's absurd proposals.

Then, he had bathed and exercised at the baths, and later he had visited Agricola ... Yes, he had. And then ... The memory would not come. While he was searching for it, he realized that his eyes were closed. Perhaps, if he opened them, he might see something that would help him remember.

A pale, blurred void slowly resolved itself into a softly lit white ceiling and a section of curiously decorated wall.

'Hi there, nice to have you back with us again. How are you feeling?'

The voice was female and not unpleasantly pitched, though there was a trace of an accent he could not quite place. Despite the strange phrasing and lightness of her words, however, the speaker sounded genuinely concerned for his well-being. The possibility that it belonged to some slave of his own house occurred to him. Yes, maybe he had been ill, and she had been directed to tend to him.

Some sudden fever, perhaps, that had muddled his mind. But if so, she had better learn to behave in a less familiar manner and show proper respect. He started to turn his head towards her, wincing as hot needles of pain stabbed into his stiff neck.

'I really wouldn't do that until we've straightened out a few things first,' the voice warned him.

Nobody spoke to him like that. With an effort, he levered himself upright on his good arm and twisted about to face her.

A woman with a lovely face, but the feathers and wings of a bird, sat in a chair next to him.

Ptolemy recoiled from her in shock, tried to find his feet, and rolled awkwardly off the far side of the contoured couch on which he had been lying. 'Stay away from me!' he commanded, scrabbling dizzily across a strangely textured floor to the wall, looking wildly about the unfamiliar room. 'Where is this place, foul harpy?' Where was his knife? Had he no weapon? He felt sick and wished his head would clear. 'Why have you been sent to persecute me!'

The harpy stood up, looking rather less demonic than he had first thought. He couldn't help noticing her figure, though apparently clothed in fine dark feathers, was surprisingly wholesome. Otherwise, she was simply wearing what were, perhaps, strangely cut undergarments. Her face creased into an annoyed frown. 'I did try to warn you,' she said. 'But you wouldn't listen. I just hope you haven't spoilt any of my first aid' She stepped towards him and he looked around frantically for a weapon. 'All right,' she said reassuringly, 'I know I must look a little odd, and you're probably confused right now. You took quite a knock on the head, but I don't think there's any concussion. I only want to help. Really. I did save your life, remember, in the temple?'

And suddenly, memory returned to Ptolemy like a dash of cold water.

'The assassins! Where are — .'

'It's okay. You'd finished off one, and I...' She looked troubled.

'Well, I guess I discouraged the other one' She made herself smile again, brightly.

It was a nice smile, Ptolemy had to admit. Unexpectedly so. For the first time, he realized that the sleeve of his tunic had been cut away and a clean bandage applied to his upper arm. Cautiously, he touched the back of his head and found a pad of spongy material adhered to his scalp.

'Now would I have gone to all this trouble if I meant you any harm?' the bird-woman enquired, reasonably. Dazedly, he shook his head — and winced at the result. 'So, wouldn't you be more comfortable back on the couch?' He nodded, more slowly this time.

He gathered his self-control and allowed her to help him up, which she did with surprising strength, and lay him back on the couch. It was a strange sensation, but not as unpleasant as he had anticipated, to feel warm flesh under the soft feathers of her arm, and he held onto her as she settled him. 'You are real, harpy. No illusion. You do not feel so ... outlandish as I first thought you. In truth, you feel almost human.'

'I am human, with temporary additions. Can I have my arm back now? Thank you. Would you like some water?' She poured from a flask on a small side table into a beaker. He drank. The water tasted fresh, but somehow different. He realized that, though the beaker was as clear as glass, it was strangely light and almost soft to the touch.

What was it made of?

'And you can stop calling me a harpy,' she added. 'My name is Perpugillium Brown, but my friends call me Peri,' She eyed him challengingly. 'What do you want to call me? Think it over for a moment before answering.'

Ptolemy carefully set the pseudo-glass back on the table, and regarded her with perplexed fascination. No stranger, far less a woman, had ever talked to him in such a commanding, yet familiar, manner; almost as though she was his equal and was offering companionship between them. But then, who knew what a peculiar creature like her considered proper behaviour? And she had undoubtedly been kind to him. As he tried to clear the last of the fog from his mind and respond sensibly to her words, another slice of memory dropped into place.

'It was you who warned me in the temple,' he said slowly.

'That's right,' she grinned. 'I guess I just don't like seeing people stabbed in the back.' Her face fell and she looked embarrassed. 'Sorry, that must remind you of what happened to your father.'

Her unexpected sensitivity did her credit, and he was surprised to find himself wanting to reassure her. 'Do not concern yourself. I was only three when he died. I hardly recall him for myself. I know him only through the memories and tales of others, and — but that is not answering your question.' He smiled slightly, looked her squarely in the face and said, with dignity and sincerity: 'You seem to have done me no small service, strange lady, and I am in your debt. And, if it is proper to address you so, then I too would like to call you Peri.' He paused, then added: 'It is a ... pleasing name to the ear.'

He was rewarded by the full warmth of her smile.

'So now,' she continued, after a moment, 'I guess you'll be wanting to ask all those traditional questions. Like: where am I? Oh, you already did that one. How did I get here? Where are you from? Take me to your leader, and so on. Yes?'

Ptolemy was disconcerted by her brisk manner. 'Why, yes, it is true. I would first know how long I have been here — wherever this place is? But, if you have a leader, should I not talk to him?'

Peri grinned. 'Well, there's the Doctor, but he's sort of out at the moment. And he's not my leader, we just travel together.'

'But he is not your ... husband?'

She chuckled. 'No.'

'A relation then, brother or — .'

'No, just a friend.'

'You are of the same clan — he is your *paterfamilias*?'

'We're not related in any way, believe me.'

'Oh. Then you are his servant — .'

'No I am not,' Peri replied firmly, 'and don't sound so stuffy about it. See here, it's obviously hard for you to understand this, but where I come from it's quite okay for a man and woman to travel together just as friends. Companions. Nothing else. Right?'

'As you say, it is ... hard to accept. Where is this place you come from? It must be a strange and distant land.' He suddenly looked at her very narrowly. 'Is it from beyond the edge of the world?' There was a very odd emphasis on his words.

She grinned. 'Not exactly from beyond any edge, but it is a long way away. It's called America, and no, you won't have heard of it, but some people do say it's a strange place.'

'And are all the people there like you?'

Peri looked down at herself. 'This? Oh no, this is only temporary, it just happened today. This morning I was perfectly normal, then something weird happened and, well, you can see. It's actually quite

an experience when you get used to it.'

Ptolemy looked at her aghast, clearly concerned, but also baffled by her casual manner.

'It is not ... a curse that has been vented on you? What God have you offended?'

'No. Just call it an occupational hazard when travelling with the Doctor. Don't worry, he says he can fix it.'

'This "Doctor", is some style of sorcerer, then?'

'You know, that's not a bad description, but not in the way you think. Look, you can make up your own mind in a minute when you talk to him, we've been chatting long enough.' She glanced at her watch, saw Ptolemy's curious expression and let him examine it. He was fascinated by the flickering digits.

'You make such fine things in America?'

'Well actually, most of them nowadays seem to come from Japan, but that's another story. You asked how long you were unconscious.

Well, I'm not sure about Roman hours, but by my watch, just over an hour. Are you feeling steady enough to walk? Because there are a few things you ought to see for yourself, then there are a few things we want to talk over with you.'

Resting on her arm, Ptolemy got up and allowed Peri to guide him out of the TARDIS's sickbay and into the corridor. He looked about him with interest. 'I do not know this building; where are we?'

'This isn't actually a building, it's more of a ship, of sorts.'

'Of the sea or the air?'

'Neither, actually. This is going to sound hard to believe, and probably won't make a lot of sense to you, but this ship travels through time and space ... Uh, between the centuries and among the stars ... You don't know the facts about the stars yet, do you? Um, well, for example: this morning, from my point of view, I was in Egypt about thirty years ago, watching, er, your mother in her barge, preparing to meet Mark Antony ...' She trailed off awkwardly as she saw a look of complete incredulity spread over Ptolemy's face. She sighed. 'I know it sounds crazy but I can prove it. Just be patient.'

They entered the control room, which was now properly lit, as the power tapped from the bomb core was flowing in steadily. But the first thing Ptolemy did was exclaim: 'What is the Oracle doing here

— have you stolen it?'

'No, actually, you sort of stole it from us' She sighed yet again.

This was getting more complicated than usual. 'Listen. The same strange accident, or whatever it was that made me change like this, hit our ship while we were travelling through time, made a copy of our control console, somehow, and seems to have dropped it where you could find it in Alexandria, sometime before the battle of Actium'

She took a quick breath. 'What you call the Oracle is just a machine packed solid with information about anything and everything in history, with a device that puts that information straight into your mind without you knowing it. No time traveller should be without one' She looked at Ptolemy's awe-struck, slightly dazed expression.

'Come on,' she said, half dragging him towards the doors, 'this is the clincher.'

Outside, Ptolemy stared around him in amazement.

'But this is the ante-chamber to my mother's tomb!'

'I know. Sorry we didn't ask permission, but it was an emergency landing. We just materialized out of thin air, you know, and here we were. We've tried to keep the mess down to the minimum. Anyway, this,' she tapped the side of the police box, 'is our ship; she's called the TARDIS. Notice something odd about her? Go on, there's no better way to find out. Take a walk around her. Remember, it's not magic, it's just a very cleverly built machine.'

He did so, in a stunned silence, feeling his way cautiously around each corner, then looked back through the doors into the spacious control room to reassure himself it was real, after he had completed the circuit.

I hope I haven't given him future shock, thought Peri.

'But it's — .'

'Yes, I know. Impressive, isn't it? Now, do you believe me?'

Ptolemy looked as though he was hanging onto his sanity by a thread, and Peri was seriously worried for a moment. But, with an almost visible effort of will, he took a fresh grip on himself, and managed to say levelly: 'After seeing this, I am prepared to believe anything is possible.'

'Well don't go that far,' exclaimed Peri. 'An open mind is all we want. Now, you'd better meet the Doctor.'

Ptolemy looked about him. 'Is he coming here soon?'

'Ah. Have you got around to something called "television" yet?'

The monitor showed only a close-up view of a pair of boot soles when Peri turned it on. As soon as she called, however, they disappeared to be replaced by the Doctor's blandly inquisitive face, as he reversed his position on his bed to bring himself closer to whatever the medallion camera was resting on. Peri introduced Ptolemy.

'Greetings to you, Ptolemy Caesar,' he replied politely. 'I'm pleased to learn you have recovered from your misadventures. Sorry we can't meet in person, just yet, but Dictator Alexander seems determined that I should appear as the star-turn in a forthcoming gladiatorial contest. I don't suppose you could put in a good word for me and possibly get him to change his mind?'

'Good Doctor, I would gladly do this thing in repayment for the service your ... friend, Peri has done me, but, alas, I do not think my word would curry favour with my half-brother at the moment. In all likelihood, it was men acting on his behalf who tried to assassinate me earlier this evening.' Ptolemy's expression was set and composed as he spoke. He had regained something of his normal stoic calm. It was not seemly to reveal private emotions before strangers.

'Oh,' exclaimed the Doctor. 'I had a suspicion that might be the case.'

Peri was more expressive, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder.

'I'm so sorry. That's a terrible thing to happen.'

Ptolemy acknowledged her sympathy with a grave nod. 'But it is the way of things,' he said simply. 'The possibility of such an attempt has been growing over these last months, and I have no doubt that today's events set the final seal on the process.'

'But your own brother, almost. I mean, why?'

Ptolemy looked at her curiously. 'I do not know, Peri from far off America, what you understand of the way things are here. But this is part of how it has always been. There are imperatives that drive our lives which sometimes override ties of blood. There are things that must be done for purposes, both noble and base, which demand such sacrifices.' The slightest flicker of distress crossed his features. 'This is all, I am sure, connected at least in part with the struggle between Alexander and Selene for sole power in the Dominion. Their plots and schemes will destroy us all, while the greatest danger lies beyond our frontiers — yet they do not acknowledge it!' For a moment, passion showed in his words.

'Ah, yes,' said the Doctor, 'I was hoping we'd come to that.'

'Just a minute, Doctor,' Peri interrupted. She looked at Ptolemy with concern. 'What are you going to do, now your life is in danger? I mean, won't Alexander try again?'

'Yes, probably he will — at the right moment, and if blame can be turned away from him. Yet, his assassin's failure and my disappearance must surely puzzle him when he hears of it. I must consider my next action with care.'

'You are welcome to stay in the TARDIS for as long as you need,'

the Doctor offered, adding wryly: 'as long as we may in turn stay inside your mother's tomb.'

'Thank you, Doctor, for your hospitality. In turn, I grant you leave to lodge in this place as you will; my mother has no further need of it.' A dry, bitter laugh escaped Ptolemy. 'Yes, there is some deep humour in the situation, is there not? A suitable place to contemplate death and the doings of one's family.'

Peri was looking uncomfortable. 'I'm afraid it gets more complicated, and nasty. I know this is going to come as a shock to you, but your mother's remains are still here — not in the coffin in the temple. I know because I looked. You can check upstairs and you'll see the seal on the burial chamber hasn't been touched for years.'

'Am I right in thinking,' the Doctor added, 'that you did not actually witness the removal of the coffin from these chambers yourself ?'

Ptolemy was looking confused. 'No, that was a task of the priests of Serapis. The coffin itself remained sealed. There were other ceremonies later, but ... why should this deception be made?'

'It's complicated to explain,' continued Peri, 'but there's a kind of bomb hidden in the coffin, together with a timing mechanism. I don't know what you call it, but it's very powerful, it tears atoms apart.'

' *Tonitrua et fulmina atomalis*,' Ptolemy said in flat, deathly tones, the colour draining from his face.

Atomic thunderstorm, thought Peri — a good name.

' *Ultimus!* Alexander dares to use it after all,' Ptolemy was staring at nothing, half talking to himself. 'He planned this whether I agreed to his propositions or not. But to raze an entire city to be rid of your sister? Alexander, must you demonstrate your power at such a cost?!'

He turned to the Doctor and Peri again, unable to hide his bitterness this time. 'I thought I had achieved a compromise over my mother's final resting place, but I was simply being used.'

'Listen, it's okay, the bomb won't go off now,' Peri said quickly,

'because we're draining its power away. In a day or so it'll be a harmless lump of lead.'

The revelation seemed to do little to cheer him. 'That is a small comfort; thank you for that service. I am further in your debt. But what has been attempted once, can be so again. The intent is still there, you see. Did I say, just moments ago, that there are sacrifices and imperatives that transcend considerations of kinship? Was I taking a perverse pride in lecturing strangers on our strength of will?

How my words are cast back at me and turned upon themselves! For this is a step too far, beyond reason, and I may have to cross that same boundary, if I dare.'

On the monitor, the Doctor frowned.

Ptolemy's face was a frozen mask. 'Alexander,' he whispered, 'I could have forgiven the attempt on my own life, but what you plan for your sister — curse her own scheming ways that have brought you both to this — that is too much! And at the cost of a fair city: your namesake, your birthplace.'

Peri said in a tiny voice: 'He would really have destroyed a whole city, just to kill his sister?'

Ptolemy nodded. 'And then he would be supreme, and who would

oppose him after such a demonstration of power? His plan is not without deeper reason, you see. Alexandria is growing in influence, and it would still be a threat, whoever ruled there.'

'But all those innocent lives ... '

'The people get what rulers they deserve, it is said. And rulers shape the people they command into their own image. Are there truly innocent people?'

'Then,' said the Doctor, as though choosing his words with care, 'if this reciprocity exists, it is best for all that the most worthy should rule, is it not? Tell me, Ptolemy Caesar, why have you allowed this situation to develop? Why have you not acted before now? You are the elder, you must have had the chance, but you threw it away. Was it guilt, I wonder, or simply that you lost your nerve?' Ptolemy's face froze.

'Doctor!' exclaimed Peri. 'Stop it!'

'I had a most interesting conversation with a philosopher today,' the Doctor continued relentlessly, 'and he also is worried about a threat from beyond the frontiers, the east, in particular. I think our friend here knows about this from first-hand experience. But he has used it, all these years, as an excuse to ignore his responsibilities at home.

And those domestic problems in their course, are his excuse for convincing himself he can do nothing about the threat from outside.

Themos has turned to a bottle for escape; Ptolemy Caesar has turned in upon himself.'

'That's a cruel thing to say, Doctor!'

'But true, sadly true,' Ptolemy whispered.

He sank his head into his hands. There was a long silence. 'It has taken a stranger to dare to say it. You are correct, Doctor: I have done just that, though I tried to conceal it even from myself. I admit my failure openly before you.'

Peri looked on, embarrassed and amazed. She began to realize what honour and pride, or at least the display of such virtues, meant in this place and time. Propriety was all important. And when they were removed ... She knew Ptolemy did not lack physical courage, but it was clearly possible to lack something deeper and altogether more subtle.

'My honour is broken. I am not worthy of my father's name.'

'Be quiet!' The Doctor's reprimand cut through the miserable words, causing Ptolemy's head to jerk up almost to attention. It was the voice of command, the voice of a far wiser and far older being. It made Peri shiver.

'You are nothing of the sort,' the Doctor continued. 'You have simply acted in a typically human fashion, and you had to admit it to yourself. But I will not have you wallowing in self pity. Believe me. I know about humans — they're my favourite species. Now we've got this out of the way, we can begin to do something positive.'

'What else is there left for me — '

'Plenty. You have a responsibility which you cannot avoid; call it destiny, if you wish. You must face up to it. Don't worry about your honour, it's reparable, along with everything else. Consider; you must still have at least some sense of self-esteem to regret what you believe you have lost. This can be built upon. And don't feel that you've brought shame upon yourself by admitting your faults before us. We are strangers here, as you said, and do not judge you as would your peers.'

'But I know I have failed.'

The Doctor beamed suddenly. 'And only a man with honour would care that he had!'

'But what if there truly is nothing to be done, and our situation is ultimately hopeless?'

'I have faced a few "hopeless" situations in my time, and I am still here. But I can't help you until you tell me what you know. I believe it is all part of some larger puzzle that will explain much of what has been going on here.'

'He's right, you know,' Peri confirmed. 'The Doctor may be the most thoroughly annoying and frustrating person — '

'What!'

'— that I know, but he's very good at solving the unsolvable. Trust him. And,' she smiled gently, 'for what it's worth: it's not what you reveal to others that matters, it's what's inside that counts — and believe me, I've had some practice with that concept today!' She

grinned ruefully. 'Anyway, if the Doctor thinks there is still a chance to put things right, then believe it!'

Ptolemy slowly sat up, and his chin set into a more resolute line.

For the first time, Peri thought she could really believe whose son he was. There had been something missing, and now it was back.

'Very well, Doctor. I will follow your advice, and try to absolve my honour. What is it you want to know?'

The Doctor beamed in satisfaction. 'Tell us what happened when you travelled to the end of the world.'

'What do you mean, you can't find him, Drusus?'

Under Vitellius's ferocious glare, even the hard eyes of the assassin turned aside. His manner betrayed unaccustomed discomfort. 'The Watch are all over the temple now, so we can't get close, but we're sure he's not in there. We left a man at his house in case he gave the first two the slip, and he hasn't seen him return either. Perhaps he's gone to a friend's place, that Agricola's, maybe?'

'Well look for him there, then!'

'We ain't got the men, have we? We're not diviners, you know.'

'No, you are inefficient, incompetent bunglers!'

'We lost a man — two men, it'll be, when the courts get done with Prollix. And what clawed him up, eh? You didn't tell us there was some wild beast mixed up in this. Or did he have a bodyguard with some odd weapon?'

'You knew all you needed to complete the job. Just go now, Drusus, and earn the balance of your fee.'

'There'll be extra ... compensation, you know. It's not as easy as you said it would be.'

'Yes, yes — just go. You'll be taken care of in full later.'

The assassin made his departure from Vitellius's private chambers as unobtrusively as he had arrived, leaving Vitellius deep in thought.

Yes, he must not forget to arrange for Drusus and his associates to be taken care of, in such a manner as to ensure they would not be

capable of implicating him afterwards. The men who carried out that task would of course be acting purely out of loyalty to him. It would leave no evidence as to who had initiated the attempt on Ptolemy, except those clues he intended should be found, of course.

But now all the careful planning had gone awry, and he was going to have to explain the failure to Alexander — somehow Curse the man! Where was Ptolemy hiding?

XVII

'However, the day after we had encountered the hydra creature, the nature of the land began to change. Agricola noticed it first, as we were passing the ruins of another river settlement.

'For all his affected dilettante manners, he had a keen mind. How I wish that were still so. Anyway, he had been deeply troubled by what we had found in the first settlement we had explored, but he had taken close note of the strange details: the peculiar disorder in the buildings that were still standing; the human remains giving no clue as to how they had died; and the terrible scrawlings on the walls, distorted visions dragged up from the pit of madness, which would haunt our dreams for many days, paired with urgent messages written in languages we could not read, yet clearly telling of some terrible event. But nothing we had seen was consistent with the aftermath of famine, pestilence or war. And now, his quick eyes recognized a new abnormality about the remains of this latest settlement. We made a landing and, alert now to the dangers from beasts such as we had already encountered, entered the dead village to investigate. I observed that it was not as overgrown as the previous settlement had been; perhaps this was significant, I do not know.

'What we found was quite inexplicable.

'Imagine a simple building of mudbrick, rough cut poles and reed thatch — but with each substance in fact shaped out of coloured wax, say, then left to warm in the sun. Gradually, the different pieces fuse together where they touch, becoming effectively one single body, sagging and distorted under its weight as the softened wax has flowed. Now let the wax harden. That is what we found in the village: twisted buildings whose separate materials had become a single mass.

Inside some huts, crude domestic utensils still lay where they had fallen, appearing individual objects, but in fact fused solid with whatever they rested on. Amongst the remains were also scraps of

fabric, that had once been bedding or clothing — though they appeared pliant, they were as hard as stone! There also we found the skeleton of what had been a dog; it had two heads. There were strange teeth marks on its bones.

'And yet, around the village, all seemed peaceful enough, though we had noticed a diminution in the sightings of the small wildlife we had become used to. Still, there were some birds to be seen, if of unusual appearance, so those who had spied them close up reported.

Yet there was danger, though we realized it too late.

'While gathering fuel for our boats, the foraging party also discovered some wild fruits and berries of kinds they had learned were edible while camped on the coast. They ate them, and brought some back for their fellows. Before nightfall, two score of men were sick, having fevers and vomiting violently. By dawn, all but a handful were dead.

'Now we faced a serious and most unexpected obstacle to further progress, in some ways worse than the onslaught of a wild animal, however monstrous. If we could no longer rely on the land for food, our supplies would not last long, and we would be forced to turn back. We *should* have turned back. But my pride, my desire to learn the secrets of this land, and show myself worthy of my lineage, would not permit it. So, I split our forces. The first century would continue on up the river with me in two boats, allowing for the possible loss of one, while the rest of the cohort, leaving us all the provisions they could spare, would return down the river to beachhead encampment and report our situation, then arrange for a string of supply dumps to be established along the river, so that we would soon have fresh provisions shipped up to us.

'I had considered sending Agricola back with the rest — the choice was between he and Potinus, who had journeyed quietly in the rear boat so far, executing his tasks competently, and without fuss. He was a less stimulating companion, but more reliable, perhaps, by virtue of his stolid nature. I could see Agricola was truly frightened by what we experienced, and his imagination conjuring up worse horrors ahead. But he put on a brave face and a pretence of unconcern and insisted on continuing with me. I could have given him a direct order; I should have done so, and saved his pride. Perhaps, if I had taken Potinus instead ... But I did not, and he returned with the rest of the fleet. You speculated on my guilt, well here lie its roots.

'So we continued.

'After two days' travel, all sign of vegetation had dwindled to bizarre and tortured forms, hardly distinguishable from the riven and tumbled rocks through which the river flowed. It was a wasteland, shaken intermittently by tremors of the Earth, which startled some of the men who had not experienced the like before. These tremors were to increase in both intensity and frequency as we proceeded. There should have been no life, and yet, on several occasions we had glimpses of ... things: forms out of nightmares, against which the hydra we had slain would seem perfectly homely. Despite the care with which we set our camps, we lost several men at night, one by one, to these unknown horrors. We fired at shadows and threw grenades at phantoms. I do not know if we inflicted any harm on them.

'Morale fell low, yet these were the best men of the legion, and they did not admit defeat. Rufinus rallied them wonderfully. I could not have continued without him. But then, I should not have tried.

Agricola was close to breaking point, but would not admit it. With him it had become a trial of his will against his fear of admitting fear.

Having come so far, he dare not fail now What would his parents think if he gave up? he would say, with forced humour. I, too, was fearful by then, but even less could I admit it. We had encountered no true enemy, you see, just the creatures and the inhospitable country.

We had suffered losses, yes, but no more, compared to our numbers, than in many an ultimately successful campaign. Fear of the unknown was our greatest enemy, and we would never admit defeat to that cause. While we had the means, we would press on. Besides, I was still determined that there should be some single reason I could discover to explain these changes ... and, I admit, there was the thought that I might, by perseverance, find a new route to the East, and triumphantly restore trade once more. Such is pride.

'But our boats could go no further, though the river remained, if just barely, navigable. Without trees, our stock of fuel was running low. They would have to return to better country to replenish their supplies, or wait for more to be sent up river after us. Any further travel would have to be on foot.

'But it seemed to me by then, that we might be indeed that close to a final end to our journey. As if this land had not already faced us with sufficient puzzles, two more were added.

'Firstly, the air seemed to be growing steadily thinner, as it does on high mountain sides, breathing was becoming difficult after any strenuous task, and it had got markedly colder. But the ground appeared to rise only gently, with true mountains still in the distance.

Strangely, we had, the day before, passed through a turbulent belt of mist or fog, which, looking back, now seemed to resemble the tops of clouds as seen from a mountain peak, as though they were below us

— except that we were not on a mountain. And the flow of the river had increased, as though it were running down a significant slope, which, by the eye, was not visible. But by observing how those around me were standing, and the hang of a plumb line, I decided there was indeed a slope which seemed to run contrary to the entire lie of the

land. Was this part of the solution? Had there been a vast upheaval of the earth in this land, as the tremors suggested, which had raised entire mountain ranges bodily and tilted the plains at their feet?

'This, however, did not explain the change in the horizon, or that in the sun.

'I was already then familiar with the difficulties in assessing distances at heights, where the clarity of the air makes distant objects appear closer than they are, but even allowing for this effect, the seemingly distant mountains grew larger at a rate disproportionate to the speed of our approach. The only explanation was that they were not the great ranges that they had first appeared, but were far smaller and closer than the maps I had of the region indicated they should have been.

'Then there was the sun, which I had observed rise a little south of those same mountains for two or three mornings. I would swear it too was appearing, very slightly, larger on each occasion.

Now, I was reasonably educated in these matters, and knew that the sun was a ball of fire at some immense distance from us, and I had never heard of any movement about the surface of the Earth, causing any marked change in its apparent size. I also knew that the image of the sun was distorted by the air when low on the horizon, causing it to seem larger. But, if the air were rapidly thinning, as we could readily testify it was, surely this effect would be reduced? We were very close to some sort of end to our quest, one way or the other.

'But by then, the unnatural state of the land had taken too great a toll on the men's will. Without apparent purpose, and with no conventional enemy to fight, their patience was at an end, and there were stirrings of discontent. It was all Rufinus and his *optio* and *tesserarius* could do to keep them in order. They would have to stay with the boats. So I would proceed on foot. A day or two would be sufficient to bring me to my answer it seemed.

But I had to have at least one companion for safety, and Agricola insisted on accompanying me. I would have preferred Rufinus, but he had to stay with the men and keep them in check, a task I knew was now beyond Agricola. He was living on his nerves, continuing on solely out of fear of being thought a coward. I think he felt, much as he dreaded what might lie ahead, that he could relax his pretence of unconcern before me alone.

'So we set off up the valley.

'With each step, the slope of the ground seemed to increase, and we had to lean into our line of march to hold our balance. The river rushed even faster down its course. A cold, steady wind began to follow us. The land rose in a series of rippling hummocks and dips, and had a crude, half-finished look about it, without any loose boulders, stones or even grains of sand to be seen. We plodded slowly on, the thin air sapping our strength. The sky had steadily grown darker until, overhead and before us, it shaded to purple rather than blue. A few of the brighter stars began to show where distant from the sun. It became steadily colder, and we were wrapped in furs, though the sunlight itself stung any exposed skin. The river was running very fast now, but clear of spray, because any obstructions had been swept away by its force. Or else, the channel was deliberately *shaped*.

'It was a fearful and unnatural place, and with each hour that we toiled on, our grip on reality slipped. Every sense, except our eyes, told us we were climbing an immense slope, now half-way to the vertical, like ants scaling the inside of a bowl — but the ground was hardly rising. The regular earth tremors had become worse, and several times we were sent tumbling by their action.

'And then, cresting the final hummock, gasping for breath, we knew we had arrived.

'The mountains were before us, within arm's reach almost, but they were not mountains.

'The rippling ground simply rose up and merged into a ragged, wavering line of frozen peaks and troughs, stretching into the distance to either side of us. In places it reached perhaps two or three hundred cubitum high, while in others it fell to as little as fifty. From a distance this ragged wall had indeed looked very much like a mountain range. And out of a great arching cavern mouth in the base of this wall the river gushed, steaming and boiling into its channel, the spray whipped up by the wind, which was blowing steadily now on our backs.

'We were light-headed and close to the end of our strength, but I had to see what lay beyond the barrier. Perhaps this was the highest point of the upheaval, and beyond lay a long sloping way down to the lands of the East. I had to find out.

'One of the lowest clefts was just within our powers to climb, and,

painfully, we made the ascent, dragging ourselves eventually into a sort of narrow valley between the peaks, the thin wind keening about our ears. We staggered on along this dark, bleak and winding way, lit only by the haze of scattered sunlight, buffeted by the wind, but at least walking on the level once more, for perhaps a *mille* or two. And then the valley came to an end as though it had been cut by knife. We fell to our knees and cautiously peered over the edge ...

'There was nothing but a black pit of stars beyond.

'There was no way to the East.

'There was no land to be seen.

'It was literally the edge of the world.

'And as we gazed into that pit, trying to comprehend what we were seeing, something rose out of the darkness towards us. A ghostly, glowing beast head it was, combining all the most repulsive features of the monsters we had so far discovered. It grew huge and opened its jaws as though to swallow us.

'This was too much for poor Agricola. With a cry of terror, he turned and ran, forcing his way against the wind, back along the valley. I too ran, I admit. But keeping watch behind me, I saw the fearful thing fade to mist as it crested the valley edge.

'I could not catch Agricola before he reached the far end. I heard his cry and saw him disappear, and knew he had fallen from the cleft in his blind panic. When I reached the edge, he was lying still below, close to the river's edge. I scrambled down as fast as I could to give him aid. I found him unconscious, with a broken arm and a bad gash to his head. These I treated as best I could. When he came round, he seemed confused and uncertain about where he was, or why he was there. And it was in this state that I led him back to the boats and the rest of our company. I blame only myself for what happened to him.

His spirit was not equal to the task he set himself, and I should have realized that. To this day, he has not recovered from his experience, though whether this is from the shock of what we found, or his injuries, I cannot say. But his fall was symbolic of my own to come.

'So we made our way back to the coast.

'I was nearly a year in that country, working my way down the coast, making new encampments, exploring inland as far as I might, to see if

what I had discovered was also the case further south.

'It was.

'Eventually, the habitable land tapered away to nothing, as the coast ran a little east of south, and the line of the edge appeared from my observations, to run the other way. But the sea did not pour over the edge, for the same effect that drew back much of the air, also held it in check, leaving a broad band of dead land, lashed by waves tossed up by the ground tremors, and the thin winds that blow always towards the edge.

'Finally, I returned to Alexandria and thence to Rome, and set my report before my mother and Marcus Antonius and other high persons.

'And they did nothing about it.

'Perhaps that is not as strange as it sounds, for what was there that could be done? It was a discovery on a scale beyond any ever made before, but what did it mean to most people's everyday lives?

Nothing. Then of course, there were those who refused to believe it, and treated it as some monstrous deception to conceal my own failure or incompetence ... or madness. I had witnesses to back my story, but steps were taken to influence or discredit them and, well, you can guess the result. Even my mother had a part in this. She explained that it was best so, and that the truth, if it became widely known or believed, might lead to dangerous social disorder.

'Besides, the Oracle had opened the way to remarkable new discoveries which held people's attention fixed firmly on the heart of the Dominion. We had room enough to expand our frontiers for a few years at least. Whatever had happened to the eastern lands was beyond our understanding, but we were clearly secure and favoured by this gift from the Gods. I was advised to put the matter aside. To consider the consequences. To wait awhile before taking further action. To forget it.

'Well, the next year I financed a private expedition deep into the desert heart of Africa, to see if the edge extended there too. It does.

What is the case in the frozen northlands, or out in the wastes of the great western ocean, I do not know, but it seems to me that all of the known world might be encircled by the edge and the blackness beyond.

'I was away for some time, and lost much prestige and advantage by it, which would weaken my position in later years. And so I began my retreat from much of public life. There seemed little point in such trivialities, somehow. You accused me of inaction, and allowing matters to slide, but you can see that I was not alone in this, and others also turned away from the truth. Perhaps you can at least understand my personal reasons. When, in due course, Antonius and my mother died, effective power passed to Alexander and Selene, who were by then well versed in political affairs. In name, we three rule the Dominion in a triumvirate, but all know my status is largely symbolic. Between them, they play their games and intrigues, and I try to mediate where I can. Both want sole power, and the final reckoning will come soon, I believe.

'Ironically, Alexander has paid more attention to the wildland to the east than any before him. He sends his trappers there to bring back the choicest specimens of the unnatural creatures they can find for display in his private zoo, or exhibition in the arena. Every sight of them repulses me, and haunts my dreams, and brings back to mind the memories of a journey into fear — and its even more terrible consequences.

'In recent years, I thought the new airships might survey the territories of the edge where we could not. But they are generally ordered to keep clear of these lands, and in any case, cannot travel far in the thin air of the barren edge country, so we have learnt little more.

'There. I have nearly finished my story. Except ...

'A year ago, I witnessed the secret test of *Ultimus* in a remote valley far to the north. I would not have thought such destruction was possible. Alexander naively believed I would support its further development and sway those who opposed it. But I saw a danger he did not: how could we use such devastating and poisonous weapons in a world I knew to be so limited? So I refused to support the construction of further devices.

'But, as it now transpires, he has gone ahead secretly with the project after all, with the consequences that you already know.

'There. Now my story is done.'

XVIII

The loud thumping on her door and the ragged chorus of drunken hails from outside finally roused Vannelia.

She opened a tiny, shuttered first floor window and peered out into the dingy alley, presently lit by a couple of hand lanterns that were weaving about like mating fireflies.

'Who's it? What'er yer want?'

'I's Cass — Cassodurus.'

'Oh, you lot. Well, shut up you idiots, I'm trying to sleep.'

'But, we got t'see you now, s'important.'

'In the morning!'

No, no, got to be now. We gotta have protection, see?'

Vannelia cackled. 'Frightened of catching something, are we? What yer got that you ain't had already? Come back in the morning — I'll throw in a free love philtre.' She started to pull the shutter to.

No, not tha' sort of protection. This is —' his voice lowered to a dramatic hiss — something to protect us from ... *spirits*!'

'From the Evil Eye,' came Strabo's rumbling voice from the darkness, followed by a series of urgent shushing sounds.

'You know about these sort of things,' said Decius, waving his hands about vaguely to indicate something indeterminately important, and almost hitting Cassodorus with his lantern.

'You got the power,' said Tiro.

'Yeah, I have — an' it works best in the morning. See you then when you've slept it off.'

'We'll pay double,' said Cassodorus quickly.

'I'll be right down.'

'That was some story,' Peri admitted. 'What did you make of it, Doctor?'

Ptolemy had looked noticeably unsteady after he had finished his tale and admitted he felt tired — which was not surprising, thought Peri, considering the shocks, both physical and mental, he had recently experienced. The Doctor had prescribed some more medication and another half hour's rest in the sickroom. This also allowed them to

confer in private.

The Doctor's face on the monitor had been screwed up in deep thought. Now it was transformed by a look of intense satisfaction.

'I think,' said the Doctor carefully, 'that I now know what the energy flux tube we travelled down actually was, and where we really are. The who and why behind it all, of course, I still don't — .'

'Hold on, Doctor. I thought we knew *where* we were: a parallel time-line.'

'And, if you remember, I said the instruments showed no indication of such a time-slip. I am now certain we are not in a parallel timeline.'

'But then what's all that out there? It can't be a coincidence that it's so much like ancient Rome — at least, before the Oracle, our console, started confusing things.'

'No, there's no coincidence involved. I'm sure everything that has happened is part of a perfectly logical sequence of events. Peri, you've seen that the Oracle is in fact a perfect copy of our console, but have you wondered what else might have been copied?'

There was a long silence.

'Doctor, you can't mean that everything out there, every person, is a *copy*!'

'Yes I do. It's the only explanation that fits the facts. The flux tube was part of what you might call a transdimensional mirror and lens assembly, which took a four-dimensional image of a section of the Earth, perhaps four thousand miles across, and used it to shape raw protoplasmic energy into an exact replica, complete down to the last detail. We were caught on the edge of the effect, being in temporal transit within the copy zone when it occurred, and were transferred down the tube along with the image data. Fortunately, it only managed to replicate our console in the process.'

'But it's incredible! The detail you'd have to record for even one person — .'

'But it doesn't need to be recorded at all. For example, imagine yourself standing in front of a good quality mirror. Your reflection is a copy of yourself, you might say. Each time you move, your reflection follows you precisely in every detail. Now, do you consider the mirror

is behaving in a particularly intelligent fashion to accomplish this, or is in any way processing the data about your appearance? Do you worry that if you move too fast or exhibit a particularly subtle expression, you will overload the mirror's capacity to reflect you accurately?'

'Well, no, of course not. It's only responding to natural laws. But a mirror is only showing a two-dimensional reflection of a three-dimensional object — and it's reversed.'

'Yes, but a second reflection will cancel the reversal. And the basic effect can be applied to higher dimensions as well, also by the application of natural, if somewhat esoteric, laws. The process may seem an impossibly complex undertaking, but it's really all a question of proper application in the end.'

Peri sighed. 'Okay, so it's possible. But *why* copy only a part of the Earth, and what's keeping it together? Why hasn't all the air poured over the edge yet? And what about the sun and moon and stars?'

'Possibly only a section of the Earth has been copied because this was an experiment to test the process. It certainly would have to be actively maintained to keep it stable, some method of compensating for the changed gravitational mass, though the gravity gradient no longer matched the curve of the surface close to the edge, you notice.

Provision for recycling of lost air ... and weather control, of course, to maintain the existing climatic patterns. The sun and moon would be artificial and far smaller than the original, hence Themos's discovery of its changed position, and the night sky would be just what the ancients thought it was: a dome studded with bright lights, with a few moving ones to represent the planets. I wonder how the phases of the moon are handled ... '

'But what's *outside* this dome?'

'A good question. Perhaps it's the laboratory of some cosmic scientist. Perhaps, a self-contained micro-universe. Wherever it is, it's isolated from the rest of the cosmos.'

'And none of the people here realized what had happened to them?'

'The whole process probably only took a fraction of a second —

how long does a mirror need to capture an image? And if everything came into being at the same moment, and appeared the same as

before, there would be no reason to suspect anything was wrong.'

'But the edge, what's happened there? Where did those awful creatures come from?'

'They were on the perimeter of the copying effect, so perhaps it wasn't strong enough by then, or out of focus. Think how a magnifying lens produces sharp detail at the centre, but blurs the image at the edges. Remember Ptolemy's description of the settlement and the landscape closer to the edge: "half-finished" he described it as looking. A very perceptive remark, though he could hardly have realized it might literally be true. The people living further away from the edge were more subtly affected, but it must have been enough to drive them mad. No wonder the land, or what was left of it, was abandoned.'

'And the ghost-head that came up over the edge?'

'Hmm ... Possibly a deliberate illusion to frighten people away. But for their own protection or for somebody else's, I wonder?'

'This is all ghastly.'

'More than that, it's unstable. This is essentially an artificially maintained biosphere now, but its inhabitants don't know it, and couldn't manage it themselves even if they did know the truth. But who is running this place, and how long will they continue to do so?'

'You mean, any moment the sun might go out, or something?'

'Possibly.'

'Thanks, Doctor, I really needed to know that.'

'You did ask.'

'Okay, okay. So we've got to find out the big answers around here.

But first, we must get the TARDIS operational again, and you out of this fight.' She looked thoughtful for a moment. 'Say, how are we going to tell Ptolemy all this? I mean, this is going to be just too much to take in. Just how do we tell him the truth?'

'There is no need to tell me,' a calm voice said from the corridor doorway.

'You have quite spoiled my evening; I hope you realize that, Vitellius?' Alexander drummed his fingers impatiently on the arm of his chair,

and he glowered in disapproval at the Prefect who stood awkwardly before him. For the first time he could recall, Vitellius appeared genuinely at a loss. The observation did not comfort him.

Not only,' he continued, 'have your people failed in their task, but Caesarion has gone into hiding with a good idea of who might be responsible for the attempt on him. If he only contemplated opposing me before, he is sure to do so now And, if that were not bad enough, those incompetents had to kill two temple guards and defile the sanctuary. You know what I had to promise the High Priest of Serapis in Rome for his co-operation with the casket. I cannot afford to offend him now This will cost me dear, Vitellius.'

'I know, Dictator.'

'Well, what steps have you taken?'

'I have ordered urgent enquiries to be made at the houses of all his friends, in case he has taken shelter with them —.'

' *Enquiries*? He is in hiding — have the places searched!'

'But on what pretext, Dictator? And it would be unwise to cause offence to his friends. Some are influential —.'

'I don't care how influential they are, find him! If you need a reason for searching houses, say I suspect he is plotting against me — which is probably true by now anyway. Anybody who is sheltering him is guilty by association. Well, don't waste time, Vitellius, give the orders!'

'I will need written authority for this, Dictator.'

'Well send in my scribe, then — *now*!'

'Forgive me for deceiving you,' said Ptolemy. 'It is discourteous after your kindness to me, but these are trying times. I could see you wished to discuss what I had told you alone, and I wished to learn the truth of what you yourselves knew.'

'So you heard?' Peri asked anxiously.

'Yes, I heard' Ptolemy's face was puzzled and intense. 'I do not pretend to understand all of what you said. But after what I have witnessed ...' He gestured about the control room. 'I must believe.'

'Ptolemy Caesar,' the Doctor said firmly, 'nothing has changed, believe that. Whatever you think now, you are the same person you were yesterday. Your perspective on history may be altered, but your world is still full of very real, very vulnerable people, who are going to need a strong and wise leader before long. At the moment, I can see no better man to fill that role than you. For their sakes, as well as your own, you must not let this revelation overwhelm you.'

'I thank you, Doctor, for your reassurances. But it is an incredible and frightening thing you are asking me to accept, and you must allow me time to come to terms with it. If I follow what I have heard, then somewhere else, our world, the original world, still exists?'

'Yes, it does.'

'And on that world, as there are two identical Oracles here —

consoles, as you call them — another Ptolemy Caesar lives there?'

'Actually, no. The Ptolemy on the other world died when he was seventeen.'

'Oh. That is strange news.' Ptolemy frowned. 'Should I feel sadness? I don't know' He shook his head. 'This is hard to accept. Tell me, how did ... he die?'

'At the hands of agents of Octavian. In that world, no Oracle appeared, and your mother and Marcus Antonius lost the battle of Actium and then the war. They both died as well.'

'So, I owe everything since then, my life included, to the Oracle?'

'You might say that.'

Ptolemy gave a dry laugh. 'That is strange. Only this morning, I was wishing it had never been found' He looked at their concerned faces. 'I will tell you something few others know. My mother, towards the end of her life, began to hate the Oracle. It had become more important than she was, you see. And the devices it helped create were outstripping her ability to understand or control them. All the trappings of this tomb were not really to ensure her safe passage to the afterlife, you know; she would take that as it came. No, they were to ensure she was remembered in *this* life. That was what she wanted most, at the end. What would she have thought if she had known this, I wonder?'

'She is remembered,' Peri assured him, gently. 'Two thousand years in the future, back on old Earth, she's still known as one of the most famous people in history.'

'Ah, that would have pleased her; thank you for telling me.'

'But now, Ptolemy Caesar,' the Doctor asked, 'what are you going to do in this world about Alexander and his dangerous rivalry with his sister? If this conflict has reached the atomic weapon stage, then it cannot be allowed to continue.'

'That is so,' agreed Ptolemy. 'But I also fear what schemes Selene may have in hand. She is, if truth be known, more capable than Alexander. Any plot he can hatch, she is bound to equal. They both want to be supreme in the Dominion, and will stop at nothing to achieve that end. I have learned there are limits, you see, both to the world and to ambition. They have not.'

'And they will both be together for these forthcoming celebrations of their supposed accord,' mused the Doctor. 'Plenty of opportunity for intrigue then, I take it.'

'Certainly, Doctor. But more, I think, they will be trying to impress the people. Three factors have always been crucial to rule in this city: control of the army, influence in the Senate and amongst the wealthy and Magisterial classes, and the will of the masses. The last of these is the most unpredictable and unreliable. But if you can win, or buy, the support of the common people, even briefly, then little can be denied you.'

'Bread and circuses,' murmured Peri.

'So you think they'll be trying to impress the people,' asked the Doctor.

'Most certainly. The Games buy Alexander popularity, whilst Selene's champion gladiator serves to win her at least grudging admiration. There are other competitive events planned between teams from the twin cities, but the Games will be the focus.'

'All this for power and a title?' asked Peri.

'Yes. Alexander wants the one thing denied his father: recognition of his divine right to rule, the restoration of the royal line of Rome, as it was with the old kings before the Republic. He wants to be Emperor of Rome and the West, as Selene is acknowledged Queen of Alexandria and the East. She in turn wants what our mother never dared openly

claim: to be Empress of Rome. They have both sought influence within the governing classes to grant these titles, and they have each the military force. But both know the people must be won over if such a move is to be successful.

'So we've got to think of some way of building up your standing to take the shine off theirs,' Peri said practically. 'And to make you too important for Alexander to risk any more funny business.'

Ptolemy looked puzzled at the last remark, which clearly did not translate well, but he understood her general meaning. 'Sadly, I have little means to accomplish such a feat. I have not maintained a following for some years, nor owned gladiators, or chariot teams, or sponsored plays — which are the usual means of impressing the masses. And all these things cost much to arrange, and my personal wealth is modest. I had no treasures to bring back from a foreign campaign, nor was I governor of a wealthy province. Your idea has merit, good Peri, but it is not possible in practice.'

'Well don't just give up yet. What important people do you know who might help? People with some influence around here, with money? Make a donation to the campaign and so on?'

'There are those I would trust, and some comrades from the old Fifth Legion who would follow me, but too few, I fear, and in the current circumstances, Alexander is likely to have them watched.

How will I contact them?'

'You might get some support from the intellectual classes,'

suggested the Doctor. 'I can give you Themos's address — .'

'Small fry, Doctor,' interrupted Peri impatiently, her mind racing.

'Besides, there's no time for a long build-up. You need a lightning campaign here. You gotta think big, like elections in the States. Get an old-fashioned bandwagon rolling: get banners made, kiss babies, throw parties and stage something to really wow them — something spectacular that'll put your name on everybody's lips. If you can't buy them, then you've got to really sell *yourself*.'

Ptolemy looked thoughtful.

'Peri,' the Doctor pointed out, 'this sounds fine, but it's still going to need funding. Where will the money come from?'

Peri beamed. 'Doctor, upstairs is a room packed full of valuables.

Why shouldn't we hock a few of them in a good cause?'

'No, I couldn't do that,' exclaimed Ptolemy, sounding shocked.

'But why not?' Peri demanded hotly. 'They're just sitting there gathering dust. I can't see that anybody has a better claim to them than you have. Besides, it's meant to help stop your Dominion from tearing itself to pieces, isn't it? Can't see how your mother would have objected to that.'

She suddenly sprang to her feet and grabbed an uncertain Ptolemy by the arm. 'You've probably forgotten what's up there by now; come and have another look. Don't go away, Doctor,' she called over her shoulder, as she led Ptolemy out through the main doors. On the monitor, the Doctor raised an amused eyebrow.

Upstairs in the treasure chamber, Ptolemy looked thoughtfully at the array of riches stacked about him, lit by glow-blobs stuck to some of the larger items of furniture. There certainly was a lot of it.

'Sorry about the ladder and the hole in the ceiling. We'll patch it up before we go, honest. But you see what I mean: just a few of these pieces would buy you an awful lot of popularity when you need it most — .'

Peri broke off, as though listening intently for something. Then she crossed to a particular floor slab and knelt down, putting her ear to the ground.

'What is the matter?' Ptolemy asked curiously.

'Oh, nothing much, just some tomb-robbers coming back for a return visit, I think.' She listened to the confused thumps and occasional clatters resonating through the earth. Some of the sounds were suggestive of people repeatedly falling over in a confined space.

Peri smiled. 'Actually, they don't sound in such good shape this time.

Don't worry, I've frightened them away before, and I can do twice as well now. Wait till they meet the Flying Ghost of the Tomb ... '

Then everything seemed to fall into place in her mind.

'No,' she amended, 'they're not tomb-robbers at all. They're the first

recruits to your campaign team! Listen, we've got about five minutes to work out our lines and get into costume.'

Finally, the slab jerked free of its bed and started to rise with the turning of the jack screw. Perhaps it had been jammed in place by its fall earlier, or perhaps something had been holding it down.

No! Don't think about what might have been holding it ...

That small, still lucid part of Cassodorus's mind that tended to become a helpless onlooker when the rest had succumbed to the more liberating effects of drink, shrank back in its corner a little more, and hoped this would all be over with before it was obliged to take charge again.

The slab tilted higher. Clumsily, props and wedges were thrust into place to hold it steady. An arm reached out of the hole and set a lantern on the floor. Cassodorus appeared to levitate up through the new opening, propelled by the hands of the others who, however drunk they might be, were certain they were not going to go first.

Nervously, he stepped forward, holding the two protective charms Vannelia had made for them. They were made of plaited straw, twisted and tied to form the Egyptian *ankh*, the life sign, and the *ouas*, the symbol of divine strength. From his pouch he drew out a small vile, pulled the stopper off with his teeth, and sprinkled it about the floor as he had been instructed. Whatever it was smelt bad enough to chase away any spirits; certainly, he felt like running at that moment. He peered into the gloom. There was no sign of the white draped chair that had been in the centre of the chamber the last time.

Was that good? Whispers and hisses from floor level urged him on.

He fumbled in his pouch again and drew out a scrap of parchment.

Vannelia had given him an incantation to complete the protective spell, and he had to get it exactly right.

He cleared his throat. Reading was not his strong point.

'Begone, uneasy spirit!

Return over sea and sand,

Haunt no more this —.'

'Argghh!' Bright torchlight flashed across the chamber.

'I am Ptolemy Caesar, Consul of this city. If you try to escape you will all die,' a voice said commandingly.

A very solid and undeniably corporeal boot had descended on Tiro's fingers, which curled over the edge of the slab hole, pinning them to the spot. Fear alone was sufficient to freeze Cassodorus in his place. Suddenly he was sober and wished he wasn't.

'Are you aware of the penalty for defiling my mother's tomb?' the voice continued. 'Do you really want to face agonizing death in the arena for your crime?'

A feeble yelp of 'No!' issued from the shaft.

'Then climb out at once! Move yourselves! You there, turn round!'

Numb with shock, Cassodorus rotated on the spot, to see the rest of the gang scrambling unhappily out of the shaft. Standing over them was a lean, cloaked figure carrying a strangely fashioned hand torch.

He marshalled them into a trembling line and looked them up and down like a centurion appraising new recruits. 'So, these are the miserable specimens who have dared disturb my mother's tomb, not once, but twice. Are you so foolhardy as to ignore the warning you received the first time? Is it stupidity or bravado that has brought you here again?'

'Just drink,' muttered Decius, who then jammed a knuckle into his mouth to plug any other ill-considered comments.

'I see,' said Ptolemy, icily unamused.

Strabo was rocking back and forward, eyes screwed shut, mumbling: 'We're goin' to die ... We're goin' to die ... '

'Shut up, man!' ordered Ptolemy, but Strabo continued.

Cassodorus found himself, to his horror, saying: 'Don't be too hard on the lad, sir. Er, he's a bit simple, you see, can't help himself ...' He trailed off as gimlet eyes lanced through him.

'Is he, indeed. And what's your excuse then? Are you simple too?'

A phalanx of futile excuses paraded themselves through Cassodorus's fertile mind. What did it matter now? He broke the habit of most of a

lifetime: 'No, Consul sir. We just wanted some more money ... actually.'

'Ah, an honest answer. What's your name?'

'Cassodorus, sir.'

'And do you want to live a long and happy life, Cassodorus?'

Was it a trick question? Would the truth work a second time? 'Yes

... ?' he ventured.

'Then I suggest you pray for it, all of you! Down on your knees.

That's right. Pray to the spirit of Rome that you will be given some task to perform by which you may atone for your crime. You! What form will the spirit of Rome come in?'

Tiro gaped. 'Er, a wolf ?'

'Possibly, but what else?'

'An eagle?'

'Yes, an eagle as we carry on our standards. A great bird. But this is the tomb of a Queen, so if it manifests itself here, it will be in female form. Think of that. Think of beating wings ... '

And suddenly they could hear beating wings.

A light came on, illuminating the gloomy vault of the dome. And there was the form of a winged woman, with steady, powerfully beating wings, her dark feathered body adorned with glittering rings, bracelets and strings of jewels. A broad Egyptian collar glowed in many colours across her shoulders, while a gold vulture head crown showed amongst the feathers of her crest.

She circled about the chamber, the eyes of the thieves riveted upon her, then she flew closer to them, hovering almost motionless in the air. She looked at each in turn, as though sizing them up. They felt the wash of wind from her wings and noted the long sharp talons on her feet and hands, which she wove before them in strange passes, as though drawing back the veils of thought and peering into their minds. Strabo started to topple over in a faint, but Decius shoved him upright.

The bird-spirit spoke:

'I am the Peri, the spirit of Rome. I have a task for you. Do it well, and you will be rewarded from the treasure of this chamber. Do it badly, or attempt to flee from it, and I will come after you' She flexed her claws meaningfully before them. 'You will help this man, Ptolemy Caesar, to fulfil his true destiny and become ruler of the Dominion, and curb the foolish squabblings of Alexander and Selene.

Serve him well. I have spoken.'

And the light went out, plunging the roof of the chamber back into darkness again. The sound of wings died away.

There was a long, thoughtful, silence. Then Cassodorus got carefully to his feet again. With an effort, he managed to hang an ingratiating smile on his lips, trying to look as though he received instructions from supernatural entities every day.

'Right you are, Consul Ptolemy, sir. What can we do for you?'

Ptolemy smiled. 'First, show me where that tunnel leads.'

XIX

'What is the meaning of this outrageous intrusion!' demanded Gaius Agricola.

The guard squad commander looked unhappily at the distinguished, night-robed man who bore down furiously upon him.

The broad entrance hall of the fine town house was already confused enough with his own men trying to push past a line of bleating servants, without the owner's personal intervention, especially when he was of the *Equites*: socially only middle class, but undeniably wealthy and influential. Not again, the commander thought. This was the third time tonight he had carried out such duty, and he had already worked out something of a strategy to minimize the unpleasantness. It involved rushing past whoever opened the front door with the minimum of explanation, but behaving as though it was all for the occupant's own good, and getting as much of the search done with before being forced to give the actual reason for what they were doing.

He had found that people did not like the reason.

Before the man could express himself further, the commander held up an impressively signed and sealed order. 'My permission, sir. I regret I must search these premises.'

Agricola read the document quickly.

'You are seeking Ptolemy Caesar? For suspected treason! This is utter nonsense! I know the man —.'

'Exactly. So we must check he's not here. Just doing our duty, you know. All right, go ahead.'

The soldiers swept through the hall and spread out, some clattering up the stairs to the upper levels, others passing through to the gardens and the servants' quarters. Agricola watched helplessly.

Then there came a commotion from above, and a knot of guards appeared on the landing holding a confused and struggling figure between them. A matronly woman was pulling at their arms crying:

'He's my son, my son ... Leave him be!'

'Found somebody, sir!' one of the guards shouted.

Agricola rounded furiously on the commander. 'That is my son, Lucius Salvius Agricola — let him go at once! Can't you see he's a poor cripple. His mind's gone.'

The commander could hear the man calling plaintively to his mother, asking what was happening.

'Let him go,' ordered the commander sharply, 'he's not the one we're after.'

The soldiers disengaged themselves, and Lucius's mother rushed to comfort him.

'Go!' Agricola senior demanded. 'You have my word that Ptolemy Caesar is not here. Please do not cause us any more distress.'

The guard commander looked him intently in the eye for a moment, then nodded. 'Withdraw!' he ordered. 'Assemble outside; he's not here.'

Ptolemy surveyed the excavated cellar at the far end of the tunnel with interest.

'Are there usable rooms upstairs?'

'Oh yes, Consul. This way.' Cassodorus snatched up a lantern to light the stairs. In his eager anxiety to please, he was practically hopping from foot to foot.

'Just a moment,' said Ptolemy, turning to the others, who were lurking uneasily in the background, still dazed by the recent turn of events. 'Understand that the presence of this tunnel is to be kept absolutely secret; there must be no clue as to its existence. While I'm inspecting the rest of this house, you can start to clear away the excavating tools. Have you somewhere you can be rid of them?'

'The, er, house next door's empty,' volunteered Tiro cautiously. 'We dumped some of the earth in there early on, but there's still room.'

'Good, use that as a store for the moment. Then level and stamp down this floor; try to make it look like a cellar again. And conceal the tunnel mouth with something, but make sure it's easily movable when we need to pass through.'

'There's a room heater with a backplate upstairs,' suggested Decius.

'That ought to cover it.'

'Fetch that down here, then.' Ptolemy frowned. 'Where did you put all the earth from the excavation. It can't all be next door?'

'Oh, no, Consul,' said Cassodorus, with a hint of returning pride,

'that was only temporary, like. We got a Privyman's cart and dumped it outside the city with the rest of the night-soil. We sprinkled a little of the real stuff on top for the look of it, like, and nobody bothered us.'

'How ingenious,' Ptolemy commented, dryly 'That might prove a useful deception to remember. Now, let us see the rest of the accommodation.'

There were three serviceable upper rooms of reasonable size, which Ptolemy viewed with satisfaction. The street outside was narrow and secluded, with several alleyways opening off it. Half the street was given over to small craftsmen's workshops and stores, which were at present dark and quiet.

'Excellent,' said Ptolemy. 'This will be the unofficial campaign headquarters.'

'Campaign, Consul? Are you going to war?'

'In a manner of speaking, Cassodorus. But it will be a war of words and ideas only, I hope. I am trying to win over the hearts of the people, and make myself popular enough to challenge Alexander for power. But I cannot afford to go directly to those with influence for their support. At least, not yet. So I must first build my support amongst the masses — and you are going to advise me how, and who to start with.'

'Me, sir?' Cassodorus looked horrified. 'Get involved in ... *politics*?'

He spoke with a suggestion that it might be a profession beneath him.

'No, really, Consul Ptolemy, sir — straight thieving's my line. I don't know anything about —.'

'But you do,' insisted Ptolemy. 'You know who can be bought, and who can wield influence and who can muster a crowd when required.

I'm not going to play by the rules my opponents expect, you see. But of course, if you feel the task is beyond you, I can always call upon the spirit again ... '

Cassodorus blanched. 'No, no, sir. Of course I know those sort of people. I just thought you meant, for a moment, begging your pardon, those fixers amongst the well-to-do and the aristos. I mean, those I really couldn't help you with, but for your ordinary folk, why of course I know who you want. Er, it'll cost a bit though, Consul.'

Ptolemy pulled a gem-studded bracelet and necklace from his pouch, and dropped it into Cassodorus's trembling hand. 'Use this to begin with. Break them up first, so they will not be recognized, then take them to whoever will exchange it for coin without asking awkward questions; I'm sure you know the sort. Whatever you do, call as little attention to yourself as possible, and don't indulge in any premature celebrations in the nearest *tabernae*. From the way you planned and executed that tunnel, it is clear to me that you have both perseverance and ingenuity, however misguided. I trust you do not lack self-control. Remember, Cassodorus, you will get ten times what you hold now if this succeeds — and a pardon for your crimes. Don't let me down.'

Cassodorus's eyes glittered with reflections from the jewels. 'I won't, Consul. You just wait and see.'

'Nowhere?' exclaimed Vitellius.

The tribune maintained a carefully expressionless face. 'Nowhere, Prefect. We've searched all the houses on the list, and his own twice, and he's nowhere to be found. Is it Possible he got out of the city before the alert was raised?'

'Perhaps,' conceded Vitellius. 'Send out mounted parties down all the main roads as far as the first staging posts and hostelries, and check there for him. See if there are any records of friends from his army days who have property in the country he might make for.

Meanwhile, keep all the houses so far searched under watch; he may still try to slip into one of them.'

'Yes, Prefect. Er, may I ask, sir, is there going to be a public announcement about him tomorrow? Give some details of what he's actually done, maybe offer a reward, and so on. It would help the search.'

Vitellius scowled. 'Are you telling me your men are not capable of finding him? Do you need more? Are three cohorts not sufficient?'

'It's not that, exactly, sir. But we're not getting any co-operation from the people, and some of them do have rank, and there are going to be complaints. It would help if we were going in on more than suspicion. Nobody believes that someone who's been as quiet as Ptolemy Caesar has all these years can have anything to do with treason. Perhaps some details would help.'

'You do not need to know any more than what you have already been told. If the citizens are not co-operative, then they must be made to obey. If they do not obey, then arrest them! That is all!'

After the tribune had departed, Vitellius continued to scowl moodily. As the hours lengthened, the expression was beginning to set.

Why couldn't Ptolemy have simply died according to plan? he thought morbidly. He had now become a dangerously unpredictable factor merely by disappearing. He might also spoil everything by simply not being a believable traitor. The tribune had pinpointed the trouble. Though Ptolemy had done nothing to promote his image over the years, he hadn't done anything to harm it either. He'd established a reputation for fulfilling his modest responsibilities honestly and fairly. And there was the lingering mystique of his father's name.

That could be dangerous. It was always the quiet ones you had to watch, he concluded, then smiled bitterly. That was a good phrase —

he should have told it to the tribune.

'I suppose you think you've been very clever?' said the Doctor.

Peri smiled broadly, even though the Doctor could not see it. 'You might almost say I'm preening myself in satisfaction, Doctor,' she quipped.

'So it's self-mockery now, is it? You must be feeling confident.

Peri! I warned you about the dangers such a change could bring.

Don't you realize your judgement might be affected? Do you know what you've done?'

'Sure. I've started the ball rolling. To quote somebody not a million miles away: "I thought I took advantage of the opportunity chance provided rather well." We've got to get something moving around here, and if it had been up to you and Ptolemy, you'd have been discussing political theory all night!'

'But co-opting a gaggle of thieves —.'

'Now don't get snobby over it, Doctor. They'll do what they're told.

They believe they're working under divine guidance, and they don't want to risk any divine *retribution* for trying any tricky stuff, either.

You should have seen their faces when I appeared!'

'Peri,' asked the Doctor, apparently changing the subject, 'how are you feeling? Are you tired?'

'Me? No, I feel just great. Full of energy. In fact, I don't think I've felt this good, well, ever.' She threw her arms about expressively, her wings briefly unfolding and flexing.

On the screen, the Doctor's features contorted into a look of deep concern. 'Peri. *Peri!* Listen to me!' He spoke with fierce authority.

His words calmed her, and she settled down. 'Okay, I'm listening,'

she said, sounding more like her usual self

'I understand you are excited, even stimulated, by what has happened, and I admire the way you have mastered your fear of the transformation. It is a triumph of will you can justly be proud of.

Probably you feel like a hero in one of those comic books your nation made so popular: miraculously transformed in some unlikely fashion, with the power to do something previously unthinkable. But don't let it cloud your judgement. You must keep telling yourself that it is only a temporary state. It cannot last; it mustn't be allowed to last. Indeed, you are working towards its end by your recent actions, questionable though they are.'

'So why are you complaining, then?'

'Because I am worried how reverting back to normal will affect you, and the more you revel in your present form, the worse it will be. It will be as hard to accept as the initial change was. Be prepared, that's all.'

Peri sighed ruefully. 'Yes, Doctor, I'll be a good scout,' she said quietly. 'I do understand what you mean. When it comes, I'll just have to treat it like another challenge. Still, if that happens, you'll be around to pick up the pieces, won't you?'

The Doctor managed a look of patent displeasure. 'Not something I look forward to with any great enthusiasm.'

Peri brightened. 'Okay, now we've got the dire portents out the way, can we get back to the campaign to boost Ptolemy with the people? These new recruits may be crooks, but we've got 'em well motivated with the old carrot-and-stick routine, and I think they're as trustworthy as anybody round here. Leastwise, Alexander or any of his mob are surely not going to be looking for any fifth column down at that level, and if everything moves quickly, he'll never know what hit him.'

'Well, if you're certain.'

'Yeah, I am. And Ptolemy has caught onto the idea smartly enough.

I think he's been waiting a long time to do something like this. What we still need, though, is some very showy stunt to really grab the people's attention. Pity they haven't got television yet.'

'I think the Games are going to be the largest forthcoming spectacle where a mass of people might be suitably assembled.'

'... Where's the main venue going to be — the Colosseum?'

'Hardly. The Colosseum was not started until AD seventy. As I

understand, the gladiatorial events will take place in the Harena Maximus, which is somewhat larger than the Colosseum, but in much the same site. The rest of the displays and the climactic equestrian events will be staged in its counterpart, the Circus Maximus.'

'Chariot racing, you mean: Ben Hur, and stuff.'

'Exactly.'

'Hmm. How big are these places?'

'In the real world, the Circus was modified and extended many times. What these particular Romans have done to it I'm not sure, but the eventual capacity of the original was, I believe, some quarter of a million seats. If the Harena is larger than the Colosseum, then it might hold perhaps seventy-five thousand.'

'Mmm, that's pretty impressive. Certainly the place for any grandstand play, then, but what?' She was thoughtfully silent for some moments. Over the comm-link, the Doctor could hear her muttering to herself: 'If Ptolemy can gatecrash with enough supporters, Alexander won't dare try anything, but we need a stunt.

Shame he hasn't got any teams competing in the races, or ... Um, Doctor, could you *really* beat this Gandos guy?'

'What's going on tonight, then?' the wagon driver asked of Pallius, as he poured out his drink.

Pallius kept his eyes low. 'Don't know — whad'ya mean?'

'Well, they're searching all the carts leaving the city, ain't they?

There's a queue backed up from the gate half-way along the Via Flaminia, ain't it? That's why I came in here, no point in getting caught up in all that. What they after then? Somebody stolen something?' He chuckled, and downed a mouthful of wine.

Behind him, a shady looking character drifted down the Hole's rickety stairs, with a silent step born out of long practice, sidled over to an even more unsavoury character who had been huddled over his drink, and whispered a few words in his ear. The drinker looked puzzled, then interested, downed the rest of his drink quickly, and followed the other back up the stairs.

Pallius made no comment. He'd seen this happen several times already

in the last hour. There was something going on. Something big. A sixth sense warned him that it would be wise, for the second time that night, not to be too curious.

'Well, what d'you reckon then?' the garrulous wagoneer persisted.

Pallius fixed him with an unpleasant stare. 'What d'you want to keep asking questions for? I don't know nothing, see. We mind our own business around here. This is a respectable establishment, this is.'

'Yes, I should think so,' said the Doctor thoughtfully.

'But only if you're sure.'

'Oh, I think I can call on enough expertise to defeat Gandos. My advantage will be that I will not actually be trying to kill him.'

'That's an advantage?'

'Certainly. It will be terribly confusing for him to face somebody who ignores opportunities to strike certain blows or to respond to his advances in the expected manner. In the final analysis, I doubt whether I would be in any greater danger competing in one fight in the arena, than anywhere else in this city, which, thanks to your actions, will become an increasingly volatile place over the next few days. In fact, a bold move like this may be the most direct way to achieve our ends. And also ... '

'Yes?'

'There should be no such thing as a "champion" gladiator. It bestows a sense of glamour on an almost indescribably brutal public spectacle. Perhaps, by defeating Gandos, this allure might be diminished slightly. Maybe it will speed the day when it finally ends, and possibly save a few lives. Certainly it may save the lives of some who would otherwise have died at his hands.'

'I know it's gruesome stuff, Doctor. But as you say, maybe it'll be finished with soon. Maybe Ptolemy will — .'

'I doubt it very much,' the Doctor said flatly. 'He is a product of this time and culture, however personable he may seem. The Romans believed it was strengthening for people to be exposed to combat and death. Remember, they built their Empire primarily upon military prowess, and this helped prepare them for the inevitable costs that entailed. Even if Ptolemy wanted to, and was made ruler of the

Dominion, he could not halt the games at a stroke. The masses have got used to the spectacle, and it would take a long time to find a substitute.' He looked purposeful once more. 'However, we mustn't become downhearted. We must do our bit and hope for the best. I concur with your plan and will fulfil my part of it.'

'Do I take that as a yes?'

Themos blinked doubtfully at his surroundings. The dingy street alarmed him, and the run-down house even more so. There also seemed to be a number of suspicious characters sidling in and out of it as though on errands of a dubious nature. He would never have come had the man who had roused him at this unreasonable hour not borne a note purporting to have been written by Doktor, which urged him to go with its bearer. It had sounded urgent, but now Themos was beginning to have his doubts.

'Oh, yeah, it's the philosopher, ain't it?' a small, rat-faced man greeted him with coarse amiability. 'Straight through to the back room, Strabo.'

'Is Doktor in there?' Themos asked anxiously.

The rat-faced man tapped a conspiratorial finger to the side of his nose. 'Somebody important, you'll see ... '

The huge man who had brought him ushered Themos up some rough stairs to the rear of the premises, and opened a door. Inside was a lamp, a table strewn with papers and a lean man who rose politely at his entry.

'Ah, good morning, Master Themos. Forgive me for having you brought here at such an hour under slightly false pretences, but we do have an acquaintance in common, and, I believe, a mutual interest in the East.'

It was half an hour before Themos emerged, slightly dazed by his meeting. His purse was heavy with money, firm suggestions on how it should best be spent rang in his ears, and he had a list of names.

Strabo was sent away with him to make sure he didn't turn to the bottle again. After what he had just heard, he was sorely tempted.

It would have been a quiet night for the city watch, if they hadn't been so busy helping the search for Ptolemy Caesar. Though the usual night people were undeniably about, the expected number of felonious

incidents, with which they usually occupied their time, actually fell slightly. It was as though a significant number of criminals had other things on their minds.

In his cell in the Praetorian guard house, the Doctor slipped into a self-induced meditative sleep. The TARDIS was continuing to charge steadily, and Peri seemed to have everything well, if unconventionally, in hand. Now he needed a spot of rest. He had a fight to prepare for.

XX

'Still nothing!' exclaimed Alexander angrily, twisting his head to face Vitellius.

The slave who was halfway through shaving him jerked the razor away in the nick of time, causing the morning light streaming in through the windows of the dressing room to flash on the sharp blade.

The slave paled. He knew who would be punished if he cut the Dictator, and it wouldn't matter whose fault it actually was.

'Regrettably not, Dictator,' admitted Vitellius. 'It might help, perhaps, if you were to make the matter public with a suitable announcement. That would clear up any confusion regarding the circumstances behind the search, and ensure maximum support and, hopefully, a speedier conclusion.'

'Yes, perhaps it is necessary now.' Then Alexander frowned intently for a moment. 'No,' he said slowly, with growing annoyance,

'of course not! Do you think I want to look a fool, Vitellius?'

'I do not understand.'

'Evidently not. What's the matter with you? Can't you see the consequences of — are you finished?' The barber nodded dumbly, hastily gathered up his tools and bowed himself out of the room.

When they were alone, Alexander continued.

'I can do nothing publicly now, Vitellius, not with Selene arriving.

Caesarion is supposed to be there to greet her, remember. What kind of incompetent will I look like if I explain that I'm having him hunted down for suspected treason, but I can't find him for the moment?

She'll make much of that story at my expense. And what sort of scene will there be if Caesarion actually appears and he is arrested in public? You know these things are best done discreetly, so the details can be arranged properly.' He sighed heavily, then continued, as though explaining something to one who was proving disappointingly obtuse. 'Caesarion alive and supporting me I would have welcomed. Caesarion dead by unknown hands — with suspicion gradually turning to Selene's agents — would be regrettable, but convenient in the longer term. Caesarion arrested a few hours ago on suspicion of treason and held safely incommunicado, I probably could explain. But Caesarion who might appear at any time and perhaps make inconvenient allegations, that I would prefer to avoid.

I'm surprised you couldn't see this for yourself.' He considered Vitellius closely. 'Perhaps you've been overworking. You might be losing your touch.'

Vitellius looked uncomfortable. 'But what of the orders that were sent out with the guards, Dictator?'

'Oh, come now, Vitellius, what is the matter with you? Think boldly. Say the orders were misunderstood, or mis-drafted. After all, only a few people saw them in trying conditions. I was not seeking Caesarion for treason, I was trying to save him from it, after the attempt on his life. And whatever Caesarion says, he will have no proof if he is pursued no further; in fact, I'll welcome him with open arms!' Alexander swelled with delight at his capacity for invention.

'Yes, this is nearly as good as if he had died, because suspicion can still fall on Selene for the attempt. As long as the nature of the search for him is adjusted accordingly, and the error explained to those concerned: sincere apologies to those respectable persons who were troubled, a reprimand to the guards for not questioning such patently absurd orders ... Yes, put it in hand straight away, Vitellius.'

'But ... I passed down these orders personally, Dictator. If it's all now turned about and revealed as a mistake, I'll look a fool.'

'Not a mistake, Vitellius — an unfortunate *misunderstanding*. And surely it's better that you look a fool. than I; after all, I'm a child of the gods. My divinity only awaits the recognition of the masses, as you keep telling me. I doubt if I'm actually capable of making a mistake — wouldn't you agree?'

Vitellius gaped helplessly for a moment, then slowly bowed his head.

'It will be done as you say ... Dictator.'

The Royal Flagship *Horus*, made a slow, deliberate pass over the capital before gracefully losing height and descending towards the landing field beyond the city walls. The morning sun caught its great hull, making it appear to glow magnificently in the sky as it turned —

as, no doubt, was the intention of the manoeuvre. People in the streets stopped and stared at the sight — as, no doubt, was also the intention.

It was far larger than any airship Rome had yet produced.

Themos stared up into the sky with the rest, impressed despite himself. There was something awe inspiring, and also frightening, about the sheer bulk of the craft as it droned overhead, its huge shadow rippling across the city as it descended, temporarily blotting out the sun. Many folk flocked to the walls, or out onto the plain to watch the craft drop its mooring lines to the waiting ground crew, and be gently eased forward until its nose mount locked with the coupling on the docking tower, and the ship was safely berthed.

Strabo, who had been looming behind him while he watched, and had uttered a brief, 'Cor. Big, ain't it?' now appeared to come out of his reverie and gently usher Themos on, like an ungainly sheepdog.

'Come on, Master Themos, you got to see lots of people, an' tell them all the things *he's* going to do for them.'

'Thank you, I'm quite aware of my objectives for the day,' Themos responded testily. 'May I remind you I entered into this undertaking purely voluntarily, in the hope that the outcome would be of benefit to the common good.' Strabo's eyes were glazing over, partly from the after effects of the previous night's drinking, but mostly out of incomprehension. 'Never mind,' concluded Themos, wearily. 'Let's get on with it. And remember, when we reach the library, you stay outside — you block out too much light.'

Crouched in the shelter of the temple parapet, Peri was watching the debarkation of the royal party from the airship through binoculars.

She could see a small cavalcade of carriages and what looked, from a distance anyway, to be decorated floats, waiting close by the airship. Obviously the visit had been prepared for, with Cleopatra Selene's personal entourage being sent on ahead ready to greet her.

Peri thought of the barge she had seen gliding gracefully up the Nile.

Someone like that, or their descendant, would never simply arrive anywhere; they would make an entrance.

Peri tracked her binoculars along the road leading from the landing field to the city gates. It was already lined with soldiers and a few scattered groups of onlookers, but it was clear the main procession was going to be within the city itself. There was little of the route visible because of the intervening buildings, but through gaps between them and in open squares and parades, she could see flashes of colour as crowds started to gather. Yes, it was clearly going to be quite a spectacle — pity she couldn't watch it from a little closer. She let her gaze drift across the city, imagining the scene at ground level amongst the crowds. The conditions should be ideal for Cassodorus's hirelings to get to work on phase one.

'Say what you like about her, she puts on a good show,' said the first man, raising his voice above the expectant hubbub of the crowd gathering in the shadow of the Arch of Antonius.

'True enough,' conceded the second man. 'But I still don't hold with this "Queen of the East" business. So deify them after they're dead, okay, but not before. It don't feel right, somehow.'

'But what if it's the will of the Gods? I mean, look at the Oracle.

Pretty obvious that they're favoured, isn't it?'

'Yeah, but if she's going to be Queen here, then Alexander has to be King.'

'Emperor, you mean. It'll be a proper Empire then.'

'All right, Emperor, then. Stands to reason ... '

'What about Ptolemy?' interjected a stranger quickly from behind them.

'Huh? What about him?' asked the first man.

'Well he's the elder, isn't he? He should be Emperor first,' pointed out the stranger.

'What's he done to deserve it?' exclaimed the first man.

'He only saved us from a civil war, didn't he? Remember a few years ago, when Alexander and Selene were at each other's throats, and we

all thought: here we go again? But it was Ptolemy who patched it up. Credit where it's due, I say.'

'Mmm, he's got a point,' admitted the second man, but the stranger had moved on and was already talking to somebody else.

'I was hoping to see Cleopatra's arrival and the parade,' complained the Doctor, petulantly. 'I was looking forward to it!'

Paulinus regarded him, once again, with amazed disbelief.

'Tomorrow you're going up against Gandos in the arena, and you're worried about missing a bit of pageantry?'

'And why shouldn't I worry about the parade? It's bound to be more pleasant than fighting Gandos. Which would you rather worry about missing?'

The little file of guards were marching the Doctor to the city training compound of Alexander's own gladiatorial school. The street they were passing down was presently deserted. In the distance could be heard cheering and general merrymaking. The Doctor's response reduced Paulinus to thoughtful silence until they reached the building.

The compound was situated in a grand structure on the scale of a palace or public baths, except that the gates were far heavier and forbiddingly studded. Paulinus identified the Doctor to the door guard, and they marched down a long hall. Gradually, the sound of combat became audible: the regular clash and ring of metal on metal, the dull thump of projectiles striking targets, the sporadic shouted commands of trainers, and the cries of men filled with blood-lust.

Passing through an iron gate, the party emerged into the great central well of the building. Instead of enclosed garden courts or wide pools, there were several yards, divided by high, solid wooden fences and surfaced with sand, like miniature arenas. Surrounding them were the exercise rooms, armoury, smithy, kitchens and living quarters for the gladiators and their trainers.

While Paulinus went to find a particular instructor, the Doctor slowly paced about, observing the combatants in the yards keenly, trailing his escort behind him as though they were an honour guard, rather than his jailers.

'Hi, Doctor,' Peri's voice sounded in his ear, 'Oh, I guess this must be Alexander's gladiator school.'

'It is indeed,' confirmed the Doctor, mouthing the words. 'And as you can see, lessons are in progress. I'm just waiting for them to find me a trainer.'

On the TARDIS's monitor, Peri could see several pairs of men engaged in trial combat scattered across the yards, while in the far corner were a row of targets for javelin, trident and axe. She had intended to call the Doctor with news of how the first phase of the campaign was proceeding, but now she hesitated. The scene before her brought home the reality, and, the danger, of the task facing the Doctor.

'Uh, this looks pretty serious stuff, Doctor. Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea after all. Look, we've got money in hand now — maybe we can bribe your guards or something?'

'No,' responded the Doctor firmly. 'We will stay with the plan. It would not be helpful to start another manhunt just now. By the way, what news of the search for Ptolemy?'

'Well, there's been no public announcement that he's wanted for anything, and Ptolemy thinks that Alexander has chickened out, or doesn't want a scene with his sister arriving any minute. But I'm making sure Ptolemy stays out of sight until we're certain of plenty of popular support.' Her voice became concerned again. 'Are you sure about going through with this?'

'Yes. My only worry was that there might have been innovations in the way of weapons and techniques that would be new to me. But everything appears quite conventional. See the agile man in the first yard, fighting with a net and trident?'

'Yes.'

'He's fighting in the style of a *retiarius*. His larger, more heavily armed opponent with the shield and axe is probably a *samnite*. They liked to pit differently armed and weighted men together to contrast their skills and methods of fighting, you see. It made for better entertainment.'

'It's ghastly.'

'Yes,' the Doctor replied simply, 'but it's how it was, and is.

Anyway, everything I can see here is quite familiar, and as the heyday of gladiatorial combat, in actuality, was still a century or two on, I'm hoping their technique won't be quite so advanced. Ah, I think this is

my personal trainer coming now.'

The Doctor surreptitiously adjusted the control on his wristband, as Paulinus returned in the company of a large man wearing a heavy leather tunic with a studded strap apron, and carrying a stout cane in the manner of a swagger stick. The newcomer's face was thickly scarred, and seemed to be set in a permanent scowl of disapproval.

'This is Instructor Otho. He will see to your dress and weapons.'

'How do you do?' The Doctor said, smiling politely.

Otho ignored the greeting, and instead walked around the Doctor, examining him critically. 'So,' he grated, sarcastically, his voice as scarred as his features, 'this is the man I'm supposed to train in one day to defeat Gandos! He's got some height to him, I grant, but he looks a bit flabby to me.' He poked the Doctor in the ribs with his cane.

'Actually I just need to use the facilities for a while ... and don't do that again, there's a good chap.'

'Can't take a little tickle, can you? I don't think you're going to last long.' And he jabbed the Doctor again.

'Now I did warn you about that,' the Doctor said sternly.

'Warned me, did you?' Otho swung the cane back for a savage cutting blow.

The Doctor stepped quickly forward, blocked Otho's arm with one hand, and stabbed straight fingers into his neck with the other. Otho's knees sagged and he slowly collapsed to the ground, eyes goggling but unable to move a muscle, as the Doctor maintained his immobilizing nerve pinch.

'Don't you know it's bad manners to prod people like that?' the Doctor admonished mildly, but with a steely undertone. 'Now be a sensible fellow and just get me anything I need,' he added amiably.

'Have another word with Paulinus about how well Alexander expects me to perform tomorrow. You wouldn't want to inconvenience the star turn, would you?' Otho gurgled incoherently. The Doctor seemed to accept this as acquiescence and gently lowered him to the ground.

Then the Doctor walked away to examine the armoury, snapping his

fingers to attract the attention of his dumbstruck guards and encouraging them to fall in behind him. Various gladiators watched on with equal amazement.

Sympathetically, Paulinus bent over and helped a dazed Otho to his feet. 'You're lucky,' he said. 'At least he didn't keep shouting "Haa!"

all the time; it's terrible when he does that.'

In the Doctor's ear, Peri was almost shouting herself 'That was wonderful — I didn't know you knew kung fu!'

'Actually, though I did study martial arts in the East once, that particular hold was based on Venusian Karate techniques; I'm not really as competent as I'd wish in the discipline, but then I haven't actually got the correct number of limbs.'

Peri laughed. 'Well, you've sure got everything tied up here. I guess I can safely leave you and check on how the whispering campaign's going.'

'Yes, I'll be busy here for a while. Sorry to miss the parade, though.'

The narrower streets had garlands slung across them, and every commemorative bust or statue of Antonius and Cleopatra was hung about with collars of flowers. As the sound of the procession grew close, the people started to wave coloured streamers in the air. It had been declared a holiday and they were out to enjoy themselves, and if that meant waving to Cleopatra Selene, so be it. There were ten days of Games and other entertainments to come, many sponsored by her, so they were content to give her a friendly welcome.

Much to Strabo's delight but Themos's annoyance, they were caught in the crowds on a corner, and had to wait until the procession passed before heading for their next destination. Themos consoled himself with the thought that time in the library had been well spent, and he had spread the word about Ptolemy being keen to sponsor a new seat of learning in the city. If only a few he had talked to passed the word on, and the story was repeated in turn, a considerable number of the intellectual class would have heard it by nightfall.

Geometric progression and the urge to gossip were the cornerstones of the first part of the campaign.

The sound of drums and horns grew louder.

A rank of soldiers appeared bearing banners, each soldier dressed in the uniform of one of the provinces of the South. A lightly stepping line of dancing girls followed, each holding a basket from which they strew petals before them. The baskets of the row behind contained candied sweets which they cast into the crowd. Then came a marching column of musicians playing drums, cymbals and curling serpent horns in a continuous fanfare, punctuated by a regular clash of percussion. Behind them came a troupe of tumblers and jugglers, who sprang and cartwheeled down the street. They were followed by a dozen fire-eaters, which brought appreciative gasps from the children in the crowd. Then came a row of carts bearing caged animals. There were snarling and frightened lions, tigers and a monstrous crocodile. After these came exotic beasts from the far south: a white rhino sporting three massive horns, a mad-eyed ostrich fully fifteen feet tall and a clutch of beetles the size of dogs that chittered and scurried about their cage, the sun sparkling on their glossy shells. Then there were more musicians, followed by another company of dancers, strewing more petals.

Then came Cleopatra Selene herself.

Heads tilted back and all eyes were raised. How clever, thought Themos; what excellent psychology.

She rode above them in a magnificently gilded throne, which was suspended beneath a miniature version of the airship *Horus*, over forty feet long, drawn by a company of slaves holding golden tether lines. There was a moment's silence as each new section of the crowd spied her approach, then a roar of appreciative applause. Themos had a brief glimpse of an attractive, strong-featured woman in classical gown and Egyptian head-dress, who bestowed minimal waves to left and right with graceful condescension. Then she had passed over them, gliding in perfect serenity down the street, trailed by another company of banner-wielding soldiers, and was gone.

Slowly, the sound of music and cheering died away.

Strabo came out of the daze the spectacle had cast over his simple mind, to find one man in the dispersing crowd still enthusiastically waving his streamer and calling out Cleopatra's name. Guiltily recalling his new allegiance, he placed a huge hand on the man's shoulder and applied his own form of elementary psychology: 'Let's hear a cheer for Ptolemy now, mate, or else ... '

On the steps of the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, Alexander stood

ready to wish his sister a public and most insincere welcome. He heard the growing cheers accompanying her approach. What sort of display was she making of herself this time? The procession wound its way slowly into the plaza before the temple, and the crowd there became equally expressive. When he saw Selene's mode of transport, he beckoned urgently to Vitellius.

'I want one just like that — only bigger!'

Then Alexander put on his noblest face and stepped towards the microphones, making a little lifting gesture to the operator who stood by the glowing boxes of amplifier valves as he did so. Egypt might have larger airships, but Selene would learn that Rome had the louder public address system.

Cassodorus was eating a quick meal with as much attention to his table manners as if it were a banquet at the finest house in Rome. He was eating from the same table as Ptolemy Caesar, Consul of Rome!

At least, they were both eating a hasty meal, while standing, from platters of cold sliced meat, cheese and hard bread set on the same rough table — even campaigners had to pause sometime to eat — but it was almost the same thing. Well, the man wasn't stuck-up, he'd say that for him. This must be the sort of thing they did in the army, Cassodorus thought vaguely: commander shows his comradeship with the men before the big battle, and this was certainly a sort of battle they were in now, weren't they? Well, it sounded like it should be that way, though he was a little unsure of such details, having steered sedulously clear of military duty all his life.

'Have all the letters been passed on yet, Cassodorus?' Ptolemy asked between bites.

Cassodorus tried to clear his mouth quickly and almost choked.

Spraying crumbs he said: 'Yes (cough) ... Consul (cough) ... all that we (cough) ... could get to. Some of your friends are still bein'

watched. Not by the Praetorians though. These are in civies.'

'But have the notes to the country gone out successfully?'

'Oh yeah, they were no problem.'

'Good. Don't waste anymore time trying to deliver further notes to addresses in the city. I can arrange for those to be passed on by ...

special means, tonight. Now, what about the crowds for tomorrow?'

'I've set Decius and Tiro onto that. You'll have the best supporters money can buy, if you'll pardon me. And we've got some people in a shop making up those banners, like you wanted. Be obliged if you'd check they're written right later, if you would, sir. Only my spelling ain't what you'd call too good, not having had much schooling, as it were.'

Ptolemy smiled understandingly. 'You have other talents, Cassodorus, which more than compensate.'

A group were sitting in the Brown Bear after the parade, contemplating the celebrations still to come.

'Didn't she look amazing, sitting up there, floating along like that?'

'I dunno, I got a crick in my neck.'

'But it was style, wasn't it?'

'Just show,' said the stranger, dismissively. None of them actually remembered inviting him, but he had generously bought the round, so commanded token respect.

'Well, here's to more like it then, I say,' said the appreciator of style. They tipped their mugs back.

'What I mean,' continued the stranger, 'is that it's very easy to be dazzled by appearances like all the other plebs, and to be taken in by

— .'

'Who's being taken in? Not me, mate; I think for myself. You can't buy my support like that. I mean a few cheers, okay — but not deep down, you know?'

'Here's to free thinking!' someone said, and they tipped their mugs again.

'Ah,' exclaimed the stranger, 'I can guess who you really support, then.'

'Er, you can?'

'By your own reason, it must be Ptolemy Caesar. He just gets quietly on with his duties in a dignified manner and doesn't try to influence the easily led with a bit of show — or offend more discerning folk,

like ourselves. Here's to the memory of his noble father.' They tipped their mugs again — and found them empty. 'No, don't you worry, it's my round again ... '

The messenger who arrived at the gates of the country villa, lying in the plain of the Tiber some nine miles north of Rome, was scruffy, but insistent. The communication he bore had to be delivered personally and at once. Finally, Glabrio's secretary was persuaded to quietly enter his master's study, to find the old man dozing in his chair.

'Your pardon, Master.'

Glabrio blinked awake and straightened himself, brushing the few white hairs that fringed his bald pate. 'Mmm ... Yes, Mellos, what is it?' he mumbled.

'There is a strange man outside with a message, Master. I believe it is important. He mentioned the name of Consul Ptolemy — .'

'What?' Glabrio was suddenly alert. 'Is it a response to my complaint about the soldiers this morning? You did send my letter?'

'I did, Master. But this man is certainly no official.'

'Well, bring him in, then.'

The man, in fact, was clearly a commoner, judging by his cheap, soiled tunic and travel-stained cloak. But there was a sharpness and self-possession in his manner that refused to be overawed by his surroundings, and he strutted up to Glabrio's desk like a bantam.

'You Senator Aulus Severus Glabrio?' he asked, with disconcerting frankness.

'I am,' responded Glabrio haughtily. 'I understand you have a message for me, my ... good man.'

'I ain't anybody's "good man",' the messenger replied proudly, drawing a folded and sealed letter from a pocket concealed within his tunic, 'I just get paid to do a job, see.' He handed the letter over. 'I've got to watch you read it, then take back a word you'll give me, that's all.'

And he waited patiently and unmoving while Glabrio, a touch myopically, read the contents.

At length, the Senator looked up, his manner subtly altered. 'Thank

you for bringing this to me. The word is "Understood".'

'"Understood". Right, I got it.' And the messenger turned on his heel without another word, and strode from the room.

'What a ... singular person,' Mellos observed.

'Never mind him,' said Glabrio crisply, his rheumy eyes alight with purpose, 'there is work to be done. We leave for Rome at dawn tomorrow, Mellos. You must arrange transport.'

'Certainly, Master. For how many?'

'Oh, everyone who can be spared from the house and estate.'

'Master?'

'You heard me. All the most able-bodied servants and workers, and my family of course — but not the youngsters, we'll have to find some sort of treat for them here.' He looked at Mellos's uncomprehending face. 'Tomorrow has been declared a holiday, has it not? Well, we are going to celebrate it, in a manner of speaking. But first, there are messages to be sent. Find some of the younger lads to act as runners, Mellos, and some riders too. I'm not sure we can reach all in time, but we will try. Wish my son were here. Have you paper to hand? Good. The first is to old Rufinus; his farm is not far away ...

'

The yard rang with the clash of axe on shield, as the two combatants surged to and fro across the sand. Around them other gladiators watched appreciatively, shouting out their encouragement or advice. At last, one fighter's shield was knocked from his grasp. A second blow sent him sprawling onto his back, with the spike of his opponent's axe at his throat.

'I yield, I yield!' he called out. There was a burst of applause from the onlookers.

The axe was withdrawn, and his opponent pulled off his broad, protective practice helmet to reveal the sweat-streaked face of the Doctor, creased into an amiable smile after his 'workout'. He reached out and gave a comradely hand-up to his beaten sparring partner.

'That was a good fight, Cynon. Thank you.'

'No!' exclaimed the other. "Tis I who should thank you, Doktor, for I have learned the lesson. But where did you master those touches of footwork and such novel use of the backswing?'

'Oh, here and there, don't you know? I have travelled quite widely.'

They walked over to a water butt, acknowledging the compliments of the other gladiators, drank thirstily and splashed water over themselves to cool down, for the sun still blazed into the yards. They sat on a shaded bench for a moment with some of the others, resting between bouts, watching the continuing practice sparring. Nobody troubled them. The trainers and overseers were giving the Doctor a respectfully wide berth.

Metaphorically, the Doctor was resting his mind as well; sitting back in a corner of his own consciousness with his feet up, as it were, and letting the personality of his third incarnation handle the physical side of things, and strike up a bonhomie with his fellow gladiators. It was hard to believe that men who might be dead the next day could still find time for humour and a strange sort of fellowship, but such was the case. Human beings never ceased to amaze him.

The only annoying aspect of the arrangement was that his former personality kept telling him he ought to watch their weight a bit.

'I wish you luck against Gandos,' continued Cynon, 'but if you should beat him, I hope I'm not the next to be pitted against you, for then I would truly be facing the finest gladiator in the world!' Cynon was one of the gladiators scheduled to fight later.

The Doctor smiled grimly, reflecting how strange it was to sit next to a man in good fellowship, who might feel obliged to try to kill him for the sake of entertainment the next day.

'I assure you, Cynon, this will be my only fight. I have other matters to attend to after this.'

'I thought like that once, the first time I won enough to clear my debts and obligation to the school — but I came back, didn't I? You get a taste for it, you see. I'll probably die in the arena,' Cynon observed, matter-of-factly. He was, the Doctor had discovered, a free man who had enrolled as a gladiator out of necessity. Most of the others in the school were slaves or criminals, who had taken the slim chance of winning freedom, against other, more certain punishments.

'Are you still going to use that odd weapon you've got the armourer

making for you?' Cynon asked.

'Yes. It should be ready shortly. Most of the parts were to hand, they just needed assembling properly.'

'But you're so skilled with an axe.'

'So, I hear, is Gandos. But he won't have seen anything like this, or be familiar with how it is best used. That will be my first advantage.'

Cynon rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'Yes, I begin to see your strategy. Well, it is free choice of weapons, so I suppose it's up to you. I hope at least you wear him down a little to give the rest of us a chance!'

'Well I certainly won't beat Gandos by acting as though he was invincible. The way you talk it seems as though he's the most dangerous adversary ever to step out into the arena.'

'Amongst men, perhaps he is. Truth be told, the thing I would fear to face most is a pack of animals: tigers, jackals or wolves, perhaps.

You can handle one or two, but the rest will always get you. And you can never be sure of what they're going to do. You may think you can read a *man*'s mind, and know if the next strike is going to be a feint or the real thing, but with animals there's always uncertainty, and it's up to the Gods and Fate whether you live or die.'

The Doctor looked deeply thoughtful, as though an idea had struck him. 'Thank you, Cynon,' he said. 'That was a most illuminating and valuable observation.'

'It was?' He laughed. 'I must be careful then; it doesn't do to think too much in this game.'

'And how is the trainee gladiator?' enquired Paulinus, ambling over from the shelter of the cool colonnade where he had spent most of the day, to make a periodic check on the Doctor's progress. He was still clinging to his discontent as a matter of pride, but the sarcasm in his remarks had been steadily diminishing.

'Fine, thank you, Captain. Everybody has been most co-operative. I hope you've placed your bet as I advised.'

Paulinus scowled. 'What's this special weapon you've had them make for you? The Dictator didn't say anything about any special weapon.'

'Neither did he say anything against one. Besides, if it helps me win, I don't think he's going to complain. Now, if you'll excuse me, I want to prepare myself to use it.' And he got up and walked over to a deserted corner of the yard.

Paulinus frowned. It almost looked as though he were talking to himself.

'Hello Peri, are you there?'

'Hi, Doctor. Everything okay?'

'Yes, but I've just had an idea for something that might possibly come in handy, on the off-chance. Have you got the recorder on?'

'Okay ... it's running now.'

'I want you to go to the lab and mix the following chemicals ... '

Through the steamy air of the *calidarium* of the Thermae of Antonius, a debate was taking place.

The Senator lifted himself onto one elbow and stared curiously at the man sprawled on the heated marble slab opposite. 'Just what are you inferring, young man?' he asked intently.

'All I meant was, perhaps now would be a good time to make a choice in the best interests of the stability of the Dominion.'

'By supporting Ptolemy Caesar?'

'Yes. Soon it will be time again to confirm Alexander in his position as Dictator for another year — a pure formality, as we all know. Equally, Ptolemy will hold his position of honorary First Consul, and Cleopatra Selene will remain Queen of the Eastern provinces; we don't mind what she calls herself out there, as long as she's content to remain one of the triumvirate here. But, be honest, do you think it's going to continue that way for much longer? Everybody knows Alexander wants to be declared Emperor, and there's never been any doubt about Cleopatra's desires. Now, do I not speak the truth?'

The Senator grunted noncommittally. The man was a stranger and did not realize how well aware he was of the pressures that were being brought to bear over the matter — from both sides.

'Two strong leaders, Alexander and his sister, but is the Dominion

large enough to contain both their ambitions?'

The senator looked hastily about him, but they were alone in the cubical at present. It was one of several that opened onto the circular hot pool, the rising steam from which was tinted by the light of the glass brick panels in the dome above it. There were a score of bathers presently visible, either lying in other cubicles, or easing themselves down into the water, but none were within earshot, he was relieved to note. This sort of talk might be ... misunderstood.

'So, what is it exactly you are suggesting?' he asked carefully.

'Oh, nothing dramatic,' the other replied reassuringly. 'Just that Ptolemy Caesar be made aware of his responsibilities, that's all.'

'And by that, you mean ... ?'

The man rolled over to face him, apparently surprised his meaning was unclear. 'Why, to take a stronger position in government, of course, and keep his two younger kin in check. After all, he's got maturity and experience that they lack. Trouble is, he's been too modest, or perhaps self-effacing, to accept the fact lately. I think somebody should remind him of his duty — that's all.'

And the man got off the slab and walked down into the clear, hot water of the pool. A few minutes later, the Senator noted him talking casually to another bather. In fact, he recalled seeing him chatting to others earlier, so it didn't seem as though he had specially singled him out. Perhaps the man simply liked the sound of his own voice. Still, there was something in what he said. A little moderation might not be a bad thing right now.

Then it came to him that he had heard Ptolemy's name mentioned in passing a few times today. He couldn't think where, though ...

Marrius Rufinus was driving his cattle in for their evening milking when he heard his wife calling his name.

He saw her half-running across the field from their little farm house, her skirts gathered in one hand, and waving something in the air with the other. He ran to meet her as she panted up to him.

'What's the matter, woman?' he exclaimed.

She could hardly speak, but thrust a sealed letter into his hands.

'Said it was ... very important ... from your old Legate ... '

He tore the paper open and read the contents slowly. His face set.

'So, he's going to make a move at last,' he muttered.

'What is it, Marrius? Is it bad news?'

'For some, maybe.' He frowned, then appeared to come to a decision. 'You take the cattle in, Julia; get Lucio to help you. I've got to get a shovel.'

'But what for, Marrius?'

'To dig something up with, of course! Something I thought I might need one day. And you'd better pack a meal for me for tomorrow. I'll be off to Rome first thing — '

The *triclinium* of Alexander's Palace rang with the sound of two hundred people making after-dinner conversation. The main courses had long since been consumed, and the rest of the evening belonged to wine, the picking away at sweet tit-bits, idle chatter and entertainment.

A small galaxy of wire-light bulbs gave brilliant illumination to the U-shaped formation of tables, flanked either side by reclining couches for the male diners, and chairs for the women, as was traditional. Within the hollow of the 'U', dancers from the southern lands swayed sensuously to the rhythm of pipes and drums, their oiled bodies glistening in the light. Around the perimeter of the hall, acrobats built human pyramids and tumbled, and jugglers of flaming torches strode to and fro. Later, when the hours at last began to weigh on the diners, the more energetic entertainers would depart, and a renowned poet and storyteller would come, and recount to them classic Greek verses and legendary tales. And so, in mellower mood, they would depart.

But for now, Alexander and Selene faced each other across the table, a quiet oasis amid the babble, and exchanged the knowing smiles of two players in a dark and intricate contest.

'I trust Ptolemy will present himself soon,' she said conversationally. 'I almost found myself missing him today. He's usually so correct in attending such functions. Remind me, what business was it that called him away?'

'Oh, you know dear Caesarion — so serious. It was probably

something quite trivial, but he had obligated himself ... that sort of thing.'

'Well, will he be with us for the Games tomorrow?'

'I really don't know. He might not realize how important an occasion it is.'

'Quite,' Selene agreed with a smile. 'He does have trouble with his sense of proportion. He never could recognize when to ignore a truth in order to pay proper attention to the vital trivialities.'

They both enjoyed a brief moment of mutual understanding.

'By the way, an amusing incident, Sister,' said Alexander. 'I came across a rogue trying to learn the secrets of the Oracle the other night.

I don't suppose you know anything about him?'

Cleopatra Selene paused in the act of sipping from her glass, her fine, imperious features flickering momentarily with concern. 'He did not damage the Oracle?'

Alexander regarded her narrowly 'No, he was just over-curious, I believe. It did occur to me that you might know something of him,' he said innocently.

'Nothing,' she said simply and flatly.

'You know, I think I believe you. I had wondered about him because he was a Greek and might have come from Alexandria. What was his name now? Dekton? No, Doktor — that was it.'

Selene's knuckles tightened about her glass. 'What did you do with him?' she asked levelly.

'Oh, I was most generous. His efforts to escape from my men were so amusing, I decided to give him a chance to save his skin. He'll be the first to face Gandos tomorrow.'

'He sounds ... most intriguing. If he is so amusing, I would be interested to meet him too.'

'You will, tomorrow.'

'No, before then. I doubt if Gandos will leave much of him to be amusing.'

'Well, I dare say it can be arranged — if you're so interested. He is certainly an original character.'

'If he can be sent to my apartments, then.'

Alexander smiled. 'And have you play any of your tricks to weaken him before the fight? Oh no. If you want to meet him so badly, you'll have to go to him, and not without my men keeping watch, mind.'

'Very well, Brother. It shall be as you wish.'

'They're not coming again, are they, mother,' asked Agricola anxiously, as she bid him good night.

'No, my son. They will not come again. You can rest easily.'

'They said they were after Ptolemy, I heard them. Have they found him?'

'No. That was all a mistake. They explained it later.'

'Ptolemy is all right then?'

'Yes, I'm sure he is fine. Don't trouble yourself about it any more.'

'It wasn't because of what ... I did, was it?'

'No!' she said firmly.

Agricola hung his head, as though from shame. 'I left Ptolemy once,' he began.

'Please, Lucius, not again.'

'Shouldn't have run away. I let him down. There were these terrible creatures and ... I was ... so frightened!'

His mother pulled him to her and comforted him as though he were a child. 'Don't think about it, now. Be calm. It's all in the past. Don't worry.'

'I'll never do it again. Never ... '

XXI

'Do you not need to wear some, er, warmer clothing?' Ptolemy asked, a little uncertainly.

Peri looked down at herself, puzzled.

To suit the clandestine nature of her forthcoming nocturnal flight, she had found a dark navy bikini with a halter neck which left her wings free. That, her watch and a belt with a pouch, containing several letters and a string bag for use later, were her only garments.

She smiled reassuringly. 'No, I'm quite okay like this, thanks. In fact, I only put these on out of habit, I guess. I'm pretty well covered without them. Actually, I've found feathers and clothes don't really mix, whatever they show in twee children's picture books ... no, I guess you've never seen any of those.' She regarded him curiously for a moment. 'Does it bother you to see me like this? I mean, I don't know what sort of swimsuits you have in Rome.'

Ptolemy looked uncomfortable, then smiled tightly. 'It is strange,'

he admitted, 'when I first saw you and thought you were a harpy, it seemed odd that you should be wearing any clothes. Now I know you are only a woman transformed — .'

'"Only" nothing!' Peri interjected. 'Feathers or not, I think I've been doing pretty well to get things off the ground around here, and being a woman doesn't come into it.'

'Forgive me, Peri, I did not mean to give offence. Please allow that your ways are strange to me; as, I suppose, mine must seem to you. It is just that I cannot imagine a situation in my ordinary life, where I would be in the company of a woman such as you, who is not a wife, whose manner is so familiar and untroubled by her appearance, yet also so independent of thought and deed.'

Peri suddenly smiled. 'Now the "independent of thought and deed"

bit, I liked. Keep that in mind, and we'll get along fine. And as for clothing, this is practical enough for what I've got to do, so I'm not about to start changing it now. Sorry if it bothers you, and I don't want to offend, but —.'

'I'm not *offended*,' Ptolemy said quickly.

Peri smiled, not unpleased, and decided to leave it there. 'Now,' she said briskly, 'have I got everything? Map of your friends' houses, their letters, the Palace special, bag for your uniform with a note for your secretary. I hope he doesn't get too much of a surprise seeing me, but I can't just toss a letter in at a window and fly off like the rest.

I'll have to wait while he gathers your things.'

'Dimetrios is a good man, and he will be relieved to have news of me after this time; I wish I could have contacted him sooner. But once he reads my instructions he will understand.'

'Okay, I'd better get going. Now you're sure you know what controls will call up the Doctor if you want to talk to him?'

'Perfectly. Remember, Peri, I am very familiar with your "console"

by a different name. Only then, I did not know what all these

"controls" might do.'

'To be honest, neither do I,' admitted Peri. 'But just don't try any experimenting. Even though we haven't got full power yet, I'm not sure what might happen.'

'I assure you,' Ptolemy said solemnly, 'I would not risk anything so foolish.'

They left the TARDIS and made their way up the stairs to the treasure chamber. A steady electric light burned there now, an extension of the shaft's work lights set up by Tiro. None of the thieves had gone beyond this chamber yet, and Peri was hoping they would never need to. Explaining the TARDIS to people was hard work.

Peri was about to fly up to the hole in the roof vault when a question popped into her mind.

'Sorry, I didn't think about it before, but talking of your house —

there's nobody else there you want to get a special message to? I don't even know if you're married or anything.'

Ptolemy's head dropped slightly, and his expression stiffened. 'I was married, briefly. My wife died some years ago.'

'Oh ... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought it up.'

'You were not to know. It does not matter now' A few words spoke of much grief.

'But it does.' She looked at him intently. 'It explains a lot, I can tell'

Her brow furrowed. 'This probably isn't the way you do it in Rome,

being stoic and all that, but it often helps to talk things like that over with people; sometimes almost total strangers are the best, believe me.' Gently, she touched his arm. 'If there's time, when this is finished, if you want to talk about it ... '

He looked at her in amazement. 'Truly, you are from a far and distant place. No one has ever spoken so boldly, but with such strange and generous intent, to me before. You must realize, it is not proper to speak so openly — .'

'Well perhaps it should be,' said Peri firmly. 'Just think about it, okay?'

He nodded silently, and she smiled warmly. Her wings spread and beat easily, and she rose up to the hole in the vault, squeezed through, and was gone. Ptolemy stood thoughtfully in the chamber for some minutes before returning to the TARDIS.

'Wake up! Special visitor for you,' Paulinus announced as he opened the door of the Doctor's cell and carried in an oil lamp, which he hung from the hook in the ceiling. There was a distinctly anxious edge to his words.

The Doctor swung himself off his bed and stood up, wondering who would come at this late hour. Though electric lighting had extended the evenings for those Romans who could afford it, the old custom of taking early nights still prevailed.

An impassive giant of a man, carrying a chair, ducked under the lintel and entered the room. He carefully set the chair down in the middle of the floor, then stepped back to the wall and folded his arms.

Before the Doctor could respond to this curious intrusion, a cloaked and hooded woman swept into the cell, looked about her with interest for a moment, then gracefully sat in the chair. Paulinus pushed the cell door to.

The woman threw back her hood, revealing a mass of dark hair loosely tied back with golden threads, finely chiselled imperious features, very dark but bright and sharp eyes and a sensuous mouth, shaped now into an amused smile.

Paulinus cleared his throat nervously. 'Her Majesty Cleopatra Selene Antonius Auletes of Egypt, Triumvir of the Dominion,' he announced, formally and unnecessarily, 'does you the honour of granting you audience with her ...'

No one was listening.

Gandos stood impassive and unmoving as a statue. Cleopatra continued to smile enigmatically at the Doctor, who was in turn staring intently at her with the most concentrated gaze Paulinus had ever seen, as though he were trying to peel her features down to the bone. Neither said a word. The silence in the cell was deafening.

Paulinus knew where his loyalties lay, but he also knew this wasn't right. At least the prisoner should have bowed.

'Now just you show some proper respect,' he began. Then he caught sight of Cleopatra's ring.

It was the largest of several that adorned her fingers, with a ruby core surrounded by a ring of diamonds. She was resting her elbow on the arm of the chair, so that her fingertips brushed teasingly at the corner of her smile. Now she gently twirled the ring, and with every movement it sparkled. Paulinus had never seen anything like it.

Somehow it seemed to capture more light than the dimly lit cell possessed, and turned it into something wonderful, something fascinating ... It seemed to resonate within his mind, until the rhythm of his thoughts was one with the twinkling of the ring.

Cleopatra lazily turned her head, and a pair of eyes, flashing like a cat's, replaced the ring in Paulinus's mind. 'Sleep,' a voice commanded, 'and remember none of this ...'

Slowly, Paulinus slid down the wall until he was sitting on the floor, then his head lolled forward.

'I trust you do not expect a toy like that to work on me,' the Doctor said, with mild indignation. He spoke in a language that was not Latin or Greek or English.

'But of course not, Doctor,' Cleopatra replied, in the same tongue. 'I just came here to talk to you, really I did.'

The Doctor eyed Gandos, who had shown no surprise at what had happened to Paulinus, with interest.

'I see you've got him well trained. Considerate of you to let me meet my opponent like this.'

'Oh, Gandos needed very little conditioning. He was already intensely

loyal to Cleopatra.'

'And just where is the *real* Cleopatra?'

'Perfectly safe, I assure you. I still have use for her.'

'Yes, to give you a stable body pattern to copy. I think you can drop the masquerade for the moment.'

The woman raised a tolerant eyebrow, and touched the wide band of the jewelled bracelet on her wrist. Her features blurred and flowed, her cheekbones lifted and the line of her jaw became squarer. An already commanding face became that of a different, but equally dominant woman.

'I might have known you'd be responsible for all this. I really hoped we'd never meet again,' said the Doctor.

'I can't take quite all the credit,' said the Rani. 'Shall we say I took advantage of circumstances beyond my control?'

Checking against the map and description Ptolemy had given that it was the right house, Peri dropped down out of the night to hover before a particular window over the sloping roof looking out onto a garden court. Fortunately, the weather was mild enough so that the shutters were flat against the walls, and the windows, recently glazed with large panes of post-Oracle glass, were ajar.

The improvement in local glazing over the last twenty years had in fact made her task simpler. She could recall learning somewhere that many people of this time, even quite wealthy ones, slept in tiny cubicles of bedrooms, sometimes tucked away inside the house, for warmth and security. Better glazing, at least for the wealthy, had allowed for larger, brighter and warmer bedrooms, which tended to be easier to find. She had discussed the matter with Ptolemy, and settled on bedrooms as being the best places to leave letters to ensure the right people received them as soon as possible.

Peri pulled the first of her letters from the pouch and slipped it through the gap into the darkened room beyond. There was no danger of her addressees not noticing the letters. Each was marked with a piece of glow-blob. That and the contents should certainly set them thinking.

She flew up and over the roof tops and on towards the next house on the list.

In the street below, the inconspicuous observers maintained their weary watch through the night — at ground level.

'I'm really rather enjoying this,' confessed the Rani. 'I was considering a suitable revenge, after you spoiled my plans back, or should I say, forward, in the nineteenth century. But this is better than I could have hoped for, and it's all your own doing. Tomorrow, I will have great pleasure in watching Gandos kill you in the arena.'

'And you just had to come and tell me that in person; what a kind thought.'

'You think it an unreasonable response to what you did? Trapping me with that megalomaniac Master in my TARDIS — which you had already sabotaged. Do you know how long it took to regain control?'

'I was sure you would — eventually.'

'But not before the Master tricked me into leaving the control room, which he sealed off Then he ejected the sub-section I was in, leaving me falling towards the Vortex!' Her eyes blazed. 'I only just managed to construct a makeshift control board in time to achieve a stable orbit around the core.'

'How ingenious,' commented the Doctor mildly. 'What happened then?'

'Something quite unexpected. There was something else orbiting the vortex core — a bubble of negative vortex energy had formed a closed hypersphere, bordered by a one-way interface. It absorbed me before I could evade it.'

'Not a pleasant experience,' the Doctor sympathized.

'That is an understatement,' the Rani sneered. 'But I survived, and made an interesting discovery. Within the bubble was a stable micro-universe ... with a *single* inhabitant' She paused dramatically.

The Doctor became more intent. 'Go on, you're dying to tell me about it.'

'No, Doctor, you're the one who's dying. But I will tell you anyway, so you'll understand the full consequences of your actions. As they say on Earth, I believe: things have a funny way of working out in the end.'

'They also have a cautionary proverb about chicken counting —

but do go on, it's really fascinating.'

'The creature was a being of pure energy, of course, with vast but unexplored abilities *within* its own universe; its actual life patterns determined the physical and dimensional constants of the place, which it could modify at will. Its powers, within a limited realm, were god-like, you might say' She grimaced. 'It was also stupid in the creative sense, and lonely, though it didn't appreciate the fact properly until I arrived.'

'So you became a surrogate mother-figure to it, and no doubt started corrupting its innocent and impressionable mind.'

'How wonderfully picturesque and lurid you can be, Doctor. I *taught* it, and I gave it *purpose*. It's grateful to me, and wants to please me. I showed it how to divert the vortex energy flowing around the bubble by initiating specific quantum tunnelling effects at the interface, so it could reach out into normal space.'

'Why didn't you escape then? The interface would have become permeable.'

'Because I needed to repair what was left of my TARDIS. Above all, I needed a complete console unit to achieve full control. I found the creature could help in the repairs, but only to a limited extent. It did something it thought of as "reading", which was in fact the scanning and replication of any object through an energy flux tube —

.'

'Ah, I'm beginning to see now.'

'But it could create nothing original; it always required a pattern to work from. Also, it would only copy something once, for some reason it cannot explain. Anyway, I set it looking through hyperspace for a suitable console unit to copy. I was hoping to find my own TARDIS, of course, but the creature found your space-time track first.'

'Why not copy an entire TARDIS?'

'It would have meant taking the occupants as well; the creature is not very discriminating within the scanning field, you see. And I didn't want any more problems just then — revenge later.'

'But it all went wrong, didn't it?'

The Rani looked annoyed. 'There was a ... misunderstanding.'

'You don't say.'

'The creature started to scan the console as you dematerialized. He spread the field to include all of the local time-space sector you were moving through ... '

'Which in this case was a large slice of the Earth circa thirty-two BC.'

'Yes. What the creature has "read", it feels compelled to replicate, which it did, inside the vortex bubble.'

'So we are isolated from normal space. I thought it might be something like that. But what about the power loss? There was also something drawing power from my ship as we were dragged up the flux tube.'

The Rani looked annoyed. 'The creature almost overreached itself with the mass of material it was trying to replicate. It couldn't draw on vortex energy quickly enough, so it took power from wherever was available.'

The Doctor beamed. 'And you suffered temporal suspension as well, I suppose. Must have been a shock when you came out of it and found that you had rather more than you bargained for.'

Cold satisfaction replaced annoyance on the Rani's face. 'Only briefly, Doctor.'

The House of Gaius Agricola was the last on Peri's list before Ptolemy's own. Everything had gone more easily than she had thought. She had accomplished her very exclusive airmail deliveries without being seen by another living thing, as far as she knew, except for a restless dog kennelled in some style in a back-courtyard, and a pair of prowling cats, who departed the scene with shrill yowls of surprise. The weather had co-operated again, filling the sky with broken clouds. The moon — or at least, its local facsimile — was still nearly new, she had confirmed, and had set shortly after the sun.

With a last glance at the map, she glided down low over a garden court, neatly laid out with shrubs and standard bushes. She took in the grand facade before her, compared it with the description from ground level Ptolemy had given her, and started to count windows.

There was a sudden loud squawk of alarm and clatter of wings fading

into the darkness. A bird roosting quietly in the bushes had been disturbed by her unexpected presence. Heart pounding from the shock, Peri dropped to the ground and crouched down behind some shrubbery. She hoped the noise had not woken anybody.

After waiting a couple of minutes, all remained still and quiet.

Cautiously she took to the air again, and flew on towards the house.

She could see the window now. Just another few moments and —

A light came on in the room she was passing, its beam catching her squarely in mid-air. Staring out at her with a look of incredulous tenor on his face was Lucius Agricola.

'At first, I admit,' continued the Rani, 'that I only wanted to find out if your console had been successfully copied. But the creature had let its attention wander while it waited for the suspension effect to wear off, and had been busy maintaining the artificial ecosphere supporting the Earth-segment. It was almost pleased with itself because it was learning to be creative, by repeating and extrapolating on the weather cycles it had observed when it first scanned the region, and simulating a sun and moon. It was also protecting the edges of the copied land. It thought this was what was meant by "writing".'

'But it did at least save millions of lives.'

'Just copies of short-lived, largely unimportant, terrestrial humanoids.'

'No! As soon as they were brought into existence, they had as much right to life as their originals.'

'A quaint notion, Doctor, and you know it — but that is your affair.

At the time, my need was to find the whereabouts of the console. I had just enough power and control to open a portal into the royal Palace in Alexandria, which was close to the epicentre of the world segment, and the most likely place for the duplicated console to have appeared. Taking advantage of the instability effect, which I assume you have already observed, I took on the form and mind pattern of Cleopatra Selene, hoping to use her position to help recharge my TARDIS, and search for the console. Of course, as soon as I looked into her mind, I knew what had happened to the console. But there was also much, much more.'

'Really, I wouldn't have thought you would have enjoyed such a close

association with an "unimportant" being!'

'But this one has such possibilities, Doctor. And the fascination of all these different intrigues and plots; it was a revelation, once I saw it all through her eyes. I hadn't realized how inventive these humans could be in such matters, and what satisfaction there was to be found in their planning and execution.' Her eyes flashed in delight. 'You wouldn't believe the lengths she and her brother are going to to achieve supreme power. But she'll win now — with my help, of course. Though most of the time I can simply let her plans and mind-set guide me. For a human, she's really quite intelligent, you know.'

The Rani was looking strangely excited. The Doctor's face creased with puzzlement, then concern.

'How long since you took her place?' he demanded.

'A few weeks of Earth time. What concern is it — .'

'Rani, you must stop it now, it's dangerous! Don't you realize what's happening? You're becoming addicted to Cleopatra's mind pattern!'

Peri hadn't thought it possible that you could freeze in mid-air, but for one incredibly extended moment, she seemed to manage just that, as she stared at Lucius Agricola.

Her mind raced.

This is the poor man Ptolemy told us about.

He's mentally disabled and haunted by visions of the past.

I probably look like a demon to him.

Any moment he's going to break down and wake the house if not the street.

I can't let that happen.

With a snap of wings she flew through the window, caught hold of Agricola as he was about to cry out, and bore him to the ground, her hand clasped firmly over his mouth.

The Rani looked reproachfully at him. 'Not good enough, Doctor.

You cannot frighten me like that.'

'You're making a big mistake. Even Time Lords can only be variations on a theme. You cannot totally take on another mind and body without there being serious consequences.'

'No!' Her response was driven by absolute conviction. 'I am perfectly in control. You don't seriously expect me to let this opportunity pass, do you? These people half-believe in a God-Queen already. I will become one — to all intents and purposes, an immortal one as well. Then I will shape this land and its people as it deserves.

What will they not accomplish with me to lead them?'

'Their *own* destiny, right or wrong. It has been long agreed, Rani, that Time Lords do not play god with short-lived species. We would be too good, or bad, at it for our own sakes, let alone theirs.'

'Fine words from such a flouter of convention as yourself. What do you care what happens to these people? You know I would make a better ruler than any they are likely to choose.'

'I care ... *because* I care,' said the Doctor desperately. 'They must choose their own path. And if you do not see that too, then you are lost.'

'No. I have won.' She smiled triumphantly, and touched the control on her bracelet morphic resonator. Her features blurred and shifted back to those of Cleopatra. She stood up. 'Oh, yes,' she added casually, 'where *is* your TARDIS, by the way? After all, you won't be needing it again, and it might as well be put to some use.'

'Find it yourself,' he snapped back.

She clicked her tongue. 'Touchy, Doctor. Never mind. In a few days it won't matter. There may be some parts worth salvaging; the rest is probably only good for scrap.' She paused significantly, but he did not rise to her goad. Her eyes flashed for a moment. 'When I have a proper console again, I will have complete control over ...' She hesitated. 'On this world, I really will be as powerful as the gods these people have so imaginatively created for themselves, but they will require no act of faith to believe in me!'

'But you can't expect the creature to maintain this place indefinitely

— it's inherently unstable! And what if something goes wrong?

Millions of people will die!'

She regarded him scornfully. 'Not if you have the strength of will to succeed, Doctor. Goodbye, until tomorrow ... '

She swept out, followed by Gandos carrying the chair.

The Doctor looked at Paulinus who was still slumped in a trance sleep against the wall. He sighed, bent over him and slapped his face lightly a few times. 'Come on, Paulinus, wake up. It's all over.'

Paulinus suddenly jerked awake in confusion. 'Huh ... What ...

Where ... What happened?'

The Doctor considered for a moment. 'Oh, nothing important,' he said.

Peri and Agricola rolled over once and then she was on top, trying to cover them both with her wings to smother any sounds he made.

He bucked under her frantically, his eyes wide and fearful over the gag of her hand. He was not weak, despite his injury, but she held his good arm pinned to his side, and he struggled uncoordinatedly, like a child. She knew the strength of her changed state was more than sufficient to restrain him.

But she hated to see the fear in his eyes.

'It's all right, I'm not a monster!' she said, as loudly as she dared. 'I know I look strange, but Ptolemy sent me. I'm a friend. I don't want to hurt you ... Please don't call out. I've a letter from Ptolemy. Shhh ...

Please ... Ptolemy — I'm helping Ptolemy!'

It was the repetition of the name that seemed to gradually calm him. Slowly, she felt him relax, and his frantic, panicked breathing steadied slightly.

She spoke with all the reassurance she could muster. 'I've got a letter from Ptolemy to your father in my bag. If you stay still, you can read it yourself, all right?' After a long moment, he gave a slight nod.

She released his arm, reached down to her belt pouch and withdrew the letter. She held it in front of his eyes. 'Do you recognize his handwriting?' Agricola nodded. 'All right, I'm going to let you go now. Please be quiet. Nobody must know I'm here. It's a secret. It's for Ptolemy, understand?'

Peri carefully lifted herself off him and stood up, extending a hand to

Agricola, which he took hesitantly, looking in wonder at her long talons, then allowing her to help him up. She sat him on the edge of his bed, smiling all the time in encouragement, and knelt beside him.

The little disc of glow-blob on the letter caught his attention, momentarily distracting him, just as it would a child.

'It glows even brighter with the lights out,' Peri told him gently. 'I can get you more if you like. I'll give it to Ptolemy to bring when he next sees you. But you must read the letter now, so you'll understand.'

She watched as he carefully unsealed the letter and read it silently to himself. At length, he turned to her.

'Ptolemy is going to become ... Dictator?' He spoke clearly, but as though he was testing the words before he said them.

'Well, maybe. At least, he's going to try and make Alexander and Cleopatra behave better.'

'And you are helping him?'

'That's right. I'm delivering these letters to people secretly, so they can be ready to show their support for Ptolemy tomorrow at the Games. Then Alexander will think twice before trying to, uh, hurt Ptolemy again.'

Agricola frowned. 'There were soldiers here last night. They said they were looking for Ptolemy.' Alarm showed on his face. 'Have they found him?'

'No, he's quite safe. I helped him escape from them — sort of.'

He tilted his head on one side, looking her up and down curiously.

'Where do you come from?'

'Now that's a long story, and I really can't stay here all night telling it. I'm from a land a long, long way away, and I came here in a very special kind of ship with a friend of mine, a wise man, who's also helping Ptolemy. In fact, he's going to fight Cleopatra's champion in the arena tomorrow — today now, rather — and he's going to ...

Well, you'll see. I hope your father and all his friends will be there. I don't know if it would be a good thing for you to go.'

'Will Ptolemy need help?'

'Well, he'll need all his friends around him.'

'Then I will go,' said Agricola, with sudden resolution. 'I promised I would never let him down again.' His face fell and his courage deserted him again as the memory of fear returned. 'I was frightened.

I ran away. I shouldn't have left him. There were *things* in the darkness ... They were chasing me ...' He shuddered.

Acutely embarrassed, Peri saw tears begin to flow down his cheeks. Awkwardly, she put her arm about his shoulders. 'It's all right now,' she said softly, trying to comfort him. 'I know what happened.

Ptolemy has forgiven you; you don't need to worry about it again.

We're going to put all that right soon.' His head dropped to rest on the soft feathers of her shoulder, then innocently against her breast, like a child seeking warmth and reassurance. Hesitantly, she stroked his hair, realizing suddenly how responsibility for another, weaker person, made you feel. Was it like this for my parents? she wondered.

After a few moments she gently disentangled him.

'Now, I've got to be going, but I'll tell Ptolemy I've seen you. I don't think you should tell your father that I've been. He might not ...

understand. But do show him the letter; just say you found it on the floor — that's important, all right?' Agricola nodded, wiping away his tears, his face placid again, responding to her smile. 'This'll be our special secret' She looked at him carefully. 'And you're not frightened of me any more?'

He shook his head.

'I've got to fly now. You can watch me go, but turn out the light first.'

He did so, and Peri climbed onto the window ledge.

'Goodbye,' she whispered.

'Goodbye,' he said. She launched herself into the darkness, her wings spreading to catch the air.

'What is your name?' he called softly into the night.

But there was no answer. She was gone.

XXII

'I got your uniform, okay,' said Peri briskly, as she I entered the TARDIS half an hour later. 'Your man Dimetrios was really cool, you know — after the first double—take, I mean. And I also met ... '

She paused, realizing that Ptolemy and the Doctor, whose face was showing on the monitor, were clearly preoccupied with another matter.

'What's happened — anything wrong?' she asked anxiously.

'The Doctor has just received a visit from Selene,' explained Ptolemy, with a troubled expression on his face, 'except that it was not Selene ... I do not yet quite understand.'

'It was the Rani,' said the Doctor bluntly. 'She has taken on the appearance of Cleopatra Selene for reasons of her own. You remember the Rani, don't you, Peri?'

'I sure do! I almost got caught by one of her trick biological land mines. It would have metamorphosed me into a tree if I'd touched it!

She's crazy!'

'She does have her particular way of doing things,' admitted the Doctor, dryly.

'I still call it crazy. What's she doing here anyway?'

The Doctor sighed. 'I'll tell you what she told me.'

Peri and Ptolemy listened attentively as the Doctor summarized his

encounter with Cleopatra/Rani. There was a thoughtful silence when he had finished.

'Can we not simply reveal her to be an imposter?' said Ptolemy, at length.

Not easily. She will be well protected, both by obvious and concealed means. You can hardly warn Alexander of what has happened and expect him to take action against her because you would simply not be believed, of course. Besides, the real Selene is held captive somewhere. It might be very dangerous to force the Rani into revealing her true self without harming her. And Peri, if you're even contemplating some sort of daring nocturnal commando-style raid on her apartments — .'

'I wasn't, honest!'

'Well don't. She has had some time to prepare herself, and augment the natural precautions Cleopatra herself would take at such times.'

'But surely,' Ptolemy persisted, 'she would be finished if she were revealed in her true form.'

'Even supposing it were possible, what would be the consequences, especially if we could not immediately find the real Cleopatra Selene to take her place?'

Ptolemy considered. 'There would be great panic, of course, a power struggle amongst her senior ministers — she has no named successor. Then Alexander would try to take control in the East, and if my position were not yet strong enough to exercise moderation ...'

He chewed his lip. 'You are right, Doctor. The consequences could be disastrous.'

'But Doctor, we can't just sit here and do nothing!' said Peri vehemently.

'We may have to do virtually that — at least, not change our plans for the immediate future. Our one advantage is that the Rani has assumed, rather carelessly, that I am alone, and that my TARDIS is probably out of power and of no threat to her. Also, she can have no idea that we are in collusion, Ptolemy Caesar. The longer this fact can be kept from her, the safer you will be.'

'But she will certainly realize there is a link between us after your

fight with Gandos, if all goes to plan.'

'I will do my best to confuse matters, as must you. The longer you have to build up your power base, without her interference, the better.

Forgive me for saying so, but I think she is concentrating solely on Alexander, because she does not view you as a serious rival for power.'

'Sadly, that has been true, but not for much longer.'

'That's the spirit. And as soon as the TARDIS is charged and functional again, we may be able to track down *her* TARDIS. Peri, what is the charge meter reading now?'

'Uh, five point eight five ... No, eight six — it's just gone up a mark.'

'Hmm. That means there might be enough energy to attempt initiating matter conversion in somewhere between, oh, twelve to fifteen hours time, say. Well, it can't be rushed, unfortunately.'

Ptolemy had been thinking. 'Doctor, if I understand all you have said, I cannot help but wonder why this Rani person, who has taken the form of Selene, is apparently so impatient to obtain the Oracle, when she need only wait.'

'What do you mean?'

'Why, because the Oracle will be sent to Alexandria anyway in two months' time, as part of the sharing agreement between the twin capitals. She must know that.'

The Doctor frowned, thoughtfully. 'She was acting as though she would have the Oracle very shortly. And her indifference about wanting my TARDIS seemed rather forced. Why bother ... Complete control ... Wasn't quite herself ...' he trailed off into silence.

'Unless,' ventured Peri, 'she somehow knows about the atom bomb Alexander was trying to slip her, and thinks that means the end to any cosy agreements. She could avoid having the bomb itself go off, of course, but she might think that would force Alexander to use the Oracle as a bargaining counter. So she wants to grab it now while she has a chance.'

'Yes, that might be so,' agreed Ptolemy.

The Doctor had been looking blank for some moments. Now he

screwed up his face in disgust, speaking half to himself. 'Of course, of course! Never dare admit she was having problems ... Hoped I would try bargaining ... '

'Doctor!' interjected Peri. 'Will you please share your revelation coherently with the rest of us?'

He spoke rapidly and intently. 'I think the Rani wants to gain access to a proper control console more urgently than she cared to admit. Of course, she may have visited me simply to gloat over my imminent demise, but perhaps she hoped I would offer my TARDIS

in exchange for my life when she confronted me with Gandos — or thinks I will engineer some ingenious escape and lead her back to it.

Failing this, it is likely that she is going to initiate some overt and precipitate action of her own very shortly, in an attempt to gain control of the Oracle, which will suit her just as well. The trouble is that we don't know how the Rani may have modified Selene's original plans. Her own behaviour may also be unpredictable, I fear, because she has underestimated the effect Selene's mind-set is having on her.'

'Whatever happens,' said Ptolemy, 'we can do little else except to be more cautious. I will take care not to reveal I know her secret.'

'But that still doesn't explain why she just can't have a little patience,' said Peri.

'Ah, yes.' The Doctor looked uncomfortable. 'There's a very good reason why she may be in a hurry to gain access to one or other of the working consoles. She may be losing her influence over the vortex creature that's maintaining this world, and needs the additional functions of a complete console unit to control it.'

'But the creature is keeping everything going, you said.'

'It is.'

'But if it stops doing its stuff — the world comes to an end!'

'Effectively so, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, *swell*!' said Peri, with feeling.

XXIII

As the sky flushed green and pink with the dawn, the closed wagon

carrying the first party of gladiators rattled through the streets towards the Harena Maximus. Inside, the Doctor was trying to peer through a narrow barred window at the approaching stadium.

'Don't give us much of a view, do they?' he remarked, conversationally.

'It is not the exterior of the arena that should concern you, Doktor,'

said Cynon, darkly. 'It's what takes place inside that matters.' There were several grunts of agreement from the other gladiators crowded into the wagon. Many were simply silent, contemplating what might be the beginning of the last day of their lives.

'Still, it's a most impressive structure,' persisted the Doctor.

There was the feeling, in the grey light, of a vast, drum-like mass brooding in the shallow valley between the Esquiline and Caelian hills, rising sheerly over the lesser buildings around it. The Doctor saw a long, curving wall go by, formed of arches rising upon arches, very like the Colosseum. Then a larger archway appeared and they turned into it, through a set of wide gates and into a torch-lit covered yard, tucked between the massive piers and arches which supported the great bank of raked seats above.

The wagon clattered to a halt, and the gladiators were unloaded and lined up, ready to be marched away to their pens and preparation rooms. Paulinus climbed down from the front seat, where he had been riding, and approached the Doctor.

'A few more hours and I will be rid of you,' he said, with some satisfaction. 'No more playing nursemaid for me.'

'And I thought we were getting on so well,' exclaimed the Doctor.

'Never mind, I'll still put in a good word on your behalf with Alexander.'

'Oh, and when do you think you'll be seeing him again?'

'This afternoon, of course. Didn't I hear that the champion gladiator gets a reward from the Dictator's own hand? After I've beaten Gandos

—.'

'Don't you have any doubts about beating him?'

'No,' said the Doctor, brightly, radiating assurance, 'what would be the point?'

'So be it; it's your funeral. You can deceive yourself as much as you want for all I care.'

'You've seen me in practice. You know what I'm capable of. You must not mistake calculated and rational *whole*-confidence, for delusory *over*-confidence. The very basis of my approach to this confrontation has been —.'

Paulinus clapped his hands over his ears. 'Enough — no more words!' he protested. 'Just take him away and keep him safe until he steps out onto the sand.'

'Not until I've had a look at the ring itself.'

'What?'

'To get my bearings, of course, and get acclimatized. I've never been here before.' He blinked ingenuously. 'You wouldn't want me to get stage fright, would you? Not in front of Alexander.'

'All right,' said Paulinus, wretchedly. 'Take the rest away,' he told the overseers. 'I'll bring this one along shortly.'

He led the Doctor through several heavy doors, and along passages and through chambers that seemed to honeycomb the structure of the stadium. The smell of old sweat and fear was heavy in the air.

Distantly, he heard some beast roar out in its rage, reminding him of the animals also housed in these catacombs. They passed through a heavy barred gate set in stonework, then a second gate set in an inner fence-wall and out onto the freshly raked sand ring of the arena floor, the gloom of the vast pit slowly lifting under the half-light of dawn.

It was like being at the bottom of a bowl, with the ranks of stone seats rising up, tier upon tier, to the crowning colonnade. Mounted on the topmost wall was a forest of masts and rigging lines, from which was suspended a vast fabric awning, formed of many sail-like panels, encircling the stadium, overhanging the upper tiers of seats to provide shelter from the sun. Something similar had been erected over the Colosseum, the Doctor recalled. In fact, the whole arena was very similar, if slightly larger and perfectly circular in form. Considering their common origin and function, perhaps this was not surprising.

Dominating one side of the arena was the Dictator's box, rising like a small temple out of the hill of seats sweeping up to the sky. There, Alexander and his retinue would, in due course, take their places. The Doctor could see three throne-like chairs set on podia within the box, to accommodate the triumvirate.

Peri's sleepy voice sounded in his earpiece. 'Morning, Doctor. You up already?'

'We gladiators are not allowed much of a lie-in. Welcome to the Harena Maximus.'

'Oh, so this is it?'

'Yes, this is it.'

'Uh, it looks almost peaceful at the moment, doesn't it?'

Not for long, I fear. There will be a parade and inspection of weapons shortly, then the morning entertainments start in a few hours, as a sort of appetizer to the main events of the thy, I believe.

First, some criminals will be thrown to the big cats —.'

'Don't tell me any more please — I want to keep my breakfast down. I know it's bloodthirsty and cruel and I'm trying not to think about it.' She changed the subject. 'Are those loudspeakers mounted on the wall over there?'

'They are. I think I saw microphone stands in the Dictator's box. It probably suits the Romans very well, considering their tradition of public oration.'

'"Friends, Romans, countrymen ..." over a public address system, you mean. They'll probably bring in floodlights next —.'

'Seen enough?' said Paulinus impatiently, coming up beside the Doctor.

'Yes, thank you,' replied the Doctor. They started back towards the gate in the arena wall. 'By the way, how much have you bet on me winning?'

'Why should I tell you —' Paulinus clamped his lips shut too late.

The Doctor smiled.

ALEXANDER —

I am most touched to learn of your concern for my well-being, which moved you to send guards to enquire after my safety, following the singular incident in the Temple of Serapis two nights past. Be assured that I am in perfect health, and look forward to attending the Games this afternoon, accompanied by a number of my friends. In the interest of public order and decorum, perhaps it would be best if no mention was made of this matter until some more suitable occasion.

— PTOLEMY

'Do you know where I found this note when I awoke?' shouted Alexander.

'No, Dictator —.'

'Pushed through my bed chamber window, that's where! Why do we employ guards, Vitellius, if they let Caesarion pass letters through my very window?'

'I'm sure your person was in no danger —.'

'It's the principle of the thing, and the nerve of it, the impudence. I didn't think Caesarion had it in him. Perhaps I've been underestimating him. If so, it's your fault, Vitellius!'

With as much reproach as he dared, Vitellius said: 'If I may point out, Dictator, you had already decided to have Ptolemy Caesar eliminated, based largely on my warnings.'

'Yes, far too late, it seems. All your advice has accomplished, is to turn an inconvenient but open opponent into a much more diplomatic and shrewd plotter, as every inference and double meaning in this note reveals. He's had the sense to gather a following, it seems, knowing I would risk nothing in public. He's beginning to think constructively again, after all these years. Pray he has not regained his ambition as well!'

'But, what are you going to do, Dictator?' said Vitellius, trying to divert Alexander's attention from his apparent failures.

'Do? Why, welcome him with open arms, what else can I do? But when the time comes, then we shall see.'

'You look fine,' Peri said firmly. 'Really smart. Everybody knows

uniforms look good for almost any occasion.'

Ptolemy considered his reflection critically in the long mirror in Peri's room.

He was wearing his old legion dress uniform, with a highly polished metal breast-plate, over a wine-red tunic with gold trimmings. On his belt was a short sword and, slung opposite, a revolver.

Peri handed Ptolemy his helmet. It had a crest on it, which she always thought looked quintessentially Roman. Carefully, he put it on, as though he had not worn it for a long time.

'Now that's the finishing touch,' she exclaimed. 'I could really go for someone dressed like that.'

Ptolemy looked at her with a puzzled frown. 'Go for?'

Peri blushed. 'Sorry. That expression doesn't translate too well.

What I mean is ... Oh, never mind. You look great; everybody will think so.'

'I doubt if Alexander or Selene — this Rani creature, would share your views.'

'No, but you're not out to impress them; you're after the floating voters, the undecided and the silent majority ... sort of. Anyway, you'll knock 'em dead — no! I know that doesn't translate too well either. Now, have you got your itinerary worked out?'

'Yes. My friends will assemble and make their way down the street past the tunnel house at midday, where I will join them. We will proceed along the agreed route, gathering parties of hired followers, arranged for by Cassodorus's men, along the way. We will arrive at the Arena in time for the start of the afternoon events and Gandos's challenge. Then we shall see.'

'It'll be fine, don't worry.'

Ptolemy grimaced. 'I admit, I do not like the idea of using hired supporters in this way.'

'Pump priming, it's called. Everybody does it. You told me yourself that people after high office around here gather hangers-on and freeloaders to make themselves look important. Besides, you'll have

plenty of your real friends there as well. Once you get yourself noticed, your campaign will snowball all by itself, believe me.'

Ptolemy was looking at her with undisguised fascination. 'Does everybody in America have such enthusiasm and confidence as you?'

Peri grinned. 'Of course — national characteristic. That's how we get things done over there.'

Ptolemy smiled back, then grew more serious. 'Before the events of the day part us, I want to express my indebtedness, once more, for the way you treated Agricola.'

'Oh, that was nothing.'

'But it was. Not all are as ... considerate, to unfortunates such as he.'

'I didn't tell you what happened just to make myself sound good, you know.'

'I know. But what you have said reveals a kind and generous nature. Thank you.' He sounded totally sincere.

There was a significant silence, which Peri broke by saying briskly:

'I think we'd better be getting on, otherwise you'll have me thinking these wings are on loan from the angels.'

'Have you ever thought, that if you are going to die, it would be better to die for some better reason than simply to entertain others?'

The Doctor looked intently round at the men in the dimly lit and stuffy cell, as they waited to be taken to the preparation room. They were the ones who would follow him against Gandos if he lost.

Cynon grinned. 'Hallo, we've got another Spartacus among us, lads.' The others chuckled. 'If you're thinking of planning a revolt, Doktor, then you've left it a bit late.'

'No, I was not planning anything specifically. Merely wondering what you valued highly enough.'

'Yeah, my life!' one of them joked. 'Only, if I had to die to get it, it wouldn't be much good, would it?' He laughed loudly.

'What about freedom,' persisted the Doctor. 'You'd all fight for that, wouldn't you?'

'Course we would,' agreed another gladiator, 'but the only way to do it is in the arena, isn't it?'

'But suppose there was just one battle you had to fight, not to entertain anybody, but perhaps to help make things better, for yourselves as well. And after that, there was a chance of a pardon.

Would you fight?'

They looked at him curiously. A few nodded. His serious intent had begun to register with them.

Cynon lowered his voice slightly. 'What do you know? Is something going to happen?'

The Doctor encompassed them all in a long, steady gaze, that made some shiver unconsciously, feeling that he knew more than they cared to learn. 'Something might happen, perhaps not today, but in a few days. If it does, you may have a chance to influence the outcome

— one way or the other. Just be prepared to act wisely, is all I say.'

'And would you also say to follow your lead?' queried Cynon.

'You could do worse,' said the Doctor, with a slight smile.

The Hole was jam-packed. Tiro was shouting to make himself heard over the chatter.

'All right, listen — shut up at the back! Now, does everybody know what they've got to do and where to go?'

There was a chorus of assent, some of it slightly slurred. Drink in the Hole was presently being dispensed free of charge to all those recruits to the unofficial Ptolemy Caesar supporters' club.

'And have you all got your tickets?'

A flurry of card strips were waved in the air. This was a rare treat for most of those present, as access to the first day at the Arena was highly prized, especially with Gandos fighting. None enquired too closely as to where the tickets had come from, or how much they had cost, which was probably just as well.

'And the banners?'

Several wooden poles bearing furled strips of fabric were waved

enthusiastically in the air.

'Okay, keep 'em rolled until I give the word. Right, let's go!'

The boisterous crowd surged for the door.

Decius led his little file of men through the back streets with notable deference. Concealed under nondescript cloaks were several wealthy and important people, not to mention several old soldiers who still looked like they could acquit themselves well in a fight.

They had assembled by ones and twos in various rendezvous.

Some would go on ahead to the arena, others would form the nucleus of Ptolemy's escort. Many had never met before, but they were all bound by various ties of friendship, camaraderie or admiration for one man, and in doing so became more than the simple sum of their numbers.

Loyalty and commitment, thought Decius. Funny ideas, really.

Wonder what it's like to do something for no good reason at all? I mean, I know what I'm here for: money, a pardon and to avoid having a bird woman spirit-thing rip my throat out one dark night, if I don't co-operate. You knew where you stood with good, selfish motives like that. But doing something for *principles*? Well, it took all sorts, he thought charitably.

As they passed along the street that ran past the tunnel house, Cassodorus's prominent features appeared at a doorway. He looked up and down quickly, then ushered the cloaked figure of Ptolemy out into the street to merge in amongst his friends. Quick greetings and handclasps were exchanged, then the group moved on.

'Come on, Master Themos,' rumbled Strabo, 'we got to find our seats.'

The throng surged around them, flowing towards the arena for the afternoon session, passing through its many entrance arches like a swarm of bees returning to their hive. The usual touts, hawkers of simple pocket telescopes for fight watching, and vendors of cheap food and drink plied their trade amongst the crowd, calling out their wares over the general babble.

'Do you suppose it's all going as planned?' Themos asked nervously.

'Course it is. Don't worry, Cass is good at getting things done. He's real

clever, he is.' A thought appeared, slowly, to strike Strabo.

'Funny you hadn't heard of him before, you both being thinking men, like?'

Themos was about to make a caustic response, when he saw the genuinely puzzled expression on the big, simple face looming over him. He cleared his throat. 'Well, we probably would have met before, but I don't get out so much these days. My hip, you see.'

Strabo looked as though a great weight had been lifted from his mind. 'Oh ... yeah ... That would be it, all right.' He frowned at Themos, as though noticing his limp for the first time, then turned to the people behind them. 'Not so fast, there — can't you see the old gent's got a bad leg?'

Peri sat disconsolately in the TARDIS control room. Suddenly she felt very alone.

For the moment, everyone had something to do except her.

She could talk to the Doctor over the comm-link, of course, but she sensed he was preparing himself mentally for the fight, so, apart from letting him know everyone had left according to plan, she didn't bother him.

She checked the time again: there was at least an hour to go before the fight. She checked the energy reserve. Another couple of hours should do it, hopefully.

With nothing better to do, she wandered outside and up the stairs to the treasure chamber.

The work light still burned, casting strange and jumbled shadows amongst the priceless artifacts. Icily, she browsed amongst them, trying to lose her thoughts in examining the details of fine craftsmanship, knowing she was only trying to kill time. It wasn't working. She spread her wings with a snap, and rose up into the air and circled the chamber. Yes, flying felt good, but she was confined in here, and longed to be outside again in the open air.

And then she allowed herself to think of what had happened two nights before, which she had deliberately buried under the last thirty-six hours of hectic activity.

Peri glided to the floor, sat in Cleopatra's large, throne-like chair, and

stared at the long, sharp talons that tipped her fingers. She remembered what it had felt like to claw and slash at the assassin in the temple, as he had stood over an unconscious Ptolemy. She remembered the blood, which she'd had to wash off before she could tend to Ptolemy.

It had felt *good*.

It had felt right somehow: the natural expression of her new abilities, her new strength. A consequence of the inevitable superiority of one who has the power of flight over any lesser beings.

'Lesser'? Did she really mean that? She had no sympathy for the assassin, but had she actually enjoyed hurting him? Well, he deserved it, didn't he? Yes, but it wasn't like her to feel that way. It wasn't in her nature ...

But right now, what was her nature?

So far, in her life, she'd thought of herself as an essentially peaceable person, preferring to fight with words or her wits, rather than physically. In any case, she had no talent even at basic unarmed combat, and she never pretended otherwise.

But now it was different, apparently.

She had become somebody with real strength, with power, with, yes, with self-confidence — to a degree she had never realized possible before. She had taken control of circumstances and bent them to her will. She had helped Ptolemy realize his own responsibility, and used fear as a tool against the thieves, and it felt good. She wanted to do it again.

Peri shuddered and hugged herself.

The Doctor had been right. This metamorphosis business had unexpected side effects. It was not going to be easy being normal again. It wouldn't simply be the flying she'd miss.

The crowd following Ptolemy grew steadily as he made his way through the city to the arena.

Once clear of the street of the tunnel house, the cloaks had been folded away, and he had gone forth openly as the Honorary Consul of Rome, being accompanied by his friends and followers to attend the Games. At regular intervals along the carefully planned route, new

parties of admirers appeared spontaneously to join the group, until it had become a very public procession through the streets. Banners seemed to materialize out of thin air, proclaiming Ptolemy Caesar as

'The People's Voice', 'The Peacemaker' and 'A Good Roman'. It wasn't a spectacular parade such as Cleopatra had staged, but it was oddly reassuring to see an important man mixing with ordinary folk like that. Soon, a couple of thousand people were making their way with Ptolemy towards the Harena Maximus.

And, somewhere inconspicuously on the outskirts of the crowd, Cassodorus looked about him and felt an unexpected glow of pride. It was all his own work. Well, almost.

Alexander had just escorted Selene to her special seat in the Dictator's box, with a very public show of good grace, when he became aware of the growing cheering from outside the Arena.

Vitellius disappeared back down the private entranceway to investigate, and returned in moments to whisper intently in Alexander's ear. Alexander scowled briefly, then recovered himself and turned to Selene with a thin smile.

'It seems, dear sister, that Caesarion will be joining us very soon —

as you can no doubt hear.'

Selene looked puzzled. 'That row ... is for him?'

'Yes. It appears he is more popular than we believed.'

Selene's expression darkened, and she had a hurried word with a member of her own retinue who sat behind her.

The doors opened at the rear of the box to admit Ptolemy and a party of his closest friends.

As the crowd saw him appear from the shadows, cheering broke out sporadically about the arena, and the banners bearing his name were waved. Ptolemy made his way to the front of the box and gracefully acknowledged the applause. He bowed to Alexander with a slightly ironic smile, greeted Cleopatra Selene with cool formality, and took his seat on Alexander's left, as Selene was seated on his right.

Alexander looked across at him with a resentful glint in his eye.

'Why?' he asked simply.

'Because I can't let it continue, Alexander; this dangerous feud between you and Selene. Indeed, to my shame, I should not have let it come thus far.'

'You want to be Emperor yourself—.'

'No! That is the difference between us, Alexander. If anything good has come out of this foolish period of inactivity of mine, it is that I have had time to consider the limits of power. If you will listen to reason, you may take any title you wish, for all I care' He looked across at Selene, who was observing the exchange with intense interest. 'I separated you two in your childish fights more than once when you were young. Must I do so again?'

Humour replaced concentration on Selene's face. 'Oh, Ptolemy,' she mocked. 'What empty threat is this? You are no longer our big brother. You may have gathered a few followers about you, but what is that compared to real power?'

'We shall see,' Ptolemy replied simply, and turned his attention to the arena floor.

The comic turns and the mock combats of the midday period were concluded, now that the audience had returned from their meal. As sand was raked over again, an expectant air settled over the arena.

The arena announcer, dressed formally in a full toga, who had been sitting unobtrusively in the corner of the box, now approached the microphone stand. With an amplified hum and crackle, the speakers came to life.

'People of Rome.' His words echoed around the great stadium.

'Once again, the challenge of Gandos, champion gladiator of all the Dominion these three years past, has been thrown down, offering free choice of weapons to any seven who will stand against him this day

— in single combat. Enter the arena ... Gandos of Alexandria!'

A gate halfway round the arena wall to the right of the Dictator's box swung open, and Gandos strode forth into the light and heat of the arena floor. Most of the crowd applauded him wildly, chanting his name. A few were conspicuously silent, and some hissed and called out derisively.

Gandos paused as he reached the centre of the ring, and raised the heavy axe he carried, making it seem light in his huge hands, turning about to acknowledge his reception. On his other arm he carried a large, oval shield, with a spiked boss. He wore a great, broad-brimmed helmet, and scale armour protected his axe arm and shoulder. Heavy greaves of polished bronze guarded his knees and shins.

In the box, Ptolemy appeared to look on impassively. Inwardly he despaired of the Doctor being capable of defeating such a powerful opponent.

'Rome has prepared its own challengers,' continued the announcer,

'but now, a late entry to the lists will be the first to face Gandos.

Doktor of Tardis!'

Peri, watching the micro-camera image on the monitor, saw the arena gate open before the Doctor, whispered a quick, 'Good luck,'

then willed herself to say nothing more until it was over ... one way or the other.

The Doctor strode out of a gate opposite the one Gandos had emerged from. There was a scattering of applause that faded into a thousand puzzled mutterings. Scores of the little pocket telescopes were focused on him, their owners trying to make out just what the odd weapon he carried actually was. He reached the centre of the ring and paused opposite Gandos. He, too, raised his weapon dramatically over his head, playing to the crowd.

It was a staff, as tall as he was, with a pair of knuckle-bows and grips mounted equidistantly on the shaft, set one third in from each end. The shaft between the grips was surrounded by several bowed strips of metal running down its length. One end of the staff was capped with an iron ball, while the other had a heavy saw-toothed blade underslung and lying parallel with the shaft, so that there was less than a hand's breadth between them. Oddly, the teeth projected inward, rather than outward, making it hard to see what function they could perform. Apart from heavy studded gauntlets and a light helmet, the Doctor was only wearing the usual combatant's simple loincloth and some bindings around his elbows and knees. Compared to the heavily armoured Gandos, he seemed woefully unprotected.

Gandos and the Doctor turned and marched side by side to the Dictator's box, and bowed.

Cleopatra Selene, looking uneasy for the first time, turned to Alexander and said sharply: 'What is that weapon? Is it allowed?'

Alexander had clearly been puzzled himself, and had motioned the announcer over to him to enquire on the point. After a brief exchange he turned to his sister. 'It has been accepted, apparently.' He saw the expression on her face and smiled. 'What is the matter, Selene? Have you no confidence in your man? I did say that this Doktor was original, did I not? Did you not find him so when you visited him?'

Selene scowled. 'Yes, most ... amusing.'

Ptolemy noted the change in her manner. Perhaps there was some hope after all.

Alexander gestured to the announcer, who said over the speakers:

'Contestants, take your places.'

The Doctor and Gandos marched back to the middle of the arena, moving apart as they went, until ten paces separated them. Then they turned and squared off.

'Begin!' the command echoed round the stadium.

Immediately, Gandos assumed a fighting stance and began to circle the Doctor, sizing him up. The Doctor turned to keep him in sight, but made no offensive gesture. They each kept a respectful distance apart. The crowd, who had been hushed to start with, now began to call out for one or other to make the first move. They wanted their entertainment — they wanted blood.

Gandos edged closer, the head of his axe making little teasing circles in the air, his feet shuffling as though he were going to charge at any moment, his body swaying from side to side, suggesting he might lunge to the left or right. The Doctor ignored all of these feints and continued to face Gandos coolly, staff held ready before him.

The calls of the crowd grew louder.

Then Gandos charged.

His axe fell with such force that it would have taken the Doctor's head off if it had connected — but it struck the bowed metal strips protecting the middle of the staff and glanced off harmlessly.

Automatically, Gandos followed through with his shield, lunging at the Doctor with its spiked boss. The Doctor stepped back, and sideways, swung the ball-end of his staff under the shield and rapped Gandos sharply on the ankle.

Gandos staggered and hopped awkwardly back a pace, more surprised than hurt.

There was a collective gasp of astonishment from the crowd and uncertain applause. Had it been an accident?

Amazingly, the Doctor did not follow up his momentary advantage, but instead turned and bowed deeply to the crowd, as though thanking them for their appreciation.

Gandos charged the Doctor's unprotected back.

The Doctor pivoted round and thrust the full length of the staff straight at Gandos's face, without any swing that could be blocked, holding onto only one grip and the heavy ball-end to gain maximum extension.

Gandos's own momentum did the rest.

There was a clang of metal as the reinforced staff butt hit the faceguard of his helmet and rode up under the brim, jerking Gandos's head backwards sharply. His feet shot from under him and he crashed down heavily onto his back.

The crowd roared in delight and surprise.

Again the Doctor bowed to them, making no attempt to follow up his advantage, as Gandos struggled to his feet, shaking his head dizzily. The faceguard of his helmet was stove in, and he tore it off and came after the Doctor bare-headed. But he did not charge at him this time — he had learned caution. Instead, he advanced with careful tread, trying to get closer to his opponent without leaving an opening, watching intently for the Doctor's next move.

The Doctor retreated at the same pace.

Gandos increased his speed.

The Doctor started to jog.

Gandos broke into a run.

The Doctor ran as well, starting to make a circuit of the arena floor.

Suddenly, the fight had become a foot race.

In the box, Ptolemy found himself smiling. Cleopatra Selene looked blankly dismayed. Alexander threw back his head and laughed aloud. His retinue, ever eager to humour him, joined in.

Those seated nearest the box, hearing the laughter, started to chuckle as well. In moments, a wave of laughter rolled around the stadium, drowning out the catcalls of those urging the combatants to stand and fight.

The Doctor ran on, keeping his distance from Gandos, who pounded doggedly after him. The sun beat down on his unprotected head. The sweat started to run off him.

Halfway round the second circuit, the Doctor stopped suddenly, turned about and threw up a hand in a dramatic 'halt' gesture, like a traffic policeman. Fearing some new trick, Gandos skidded to a standstill. The Doctor dropped to one knee, fumbled with the lacing of his sandal for a moment as though it had come loose, then stood up, waved Gandos encouragingly on, and continued running.

The crowd were in uproar, divided between frustrated bloodlust and laughter at the absurd spectacle. In the box, Alexander choked out, between guffaws: 'He is original, I told you so!' Selene made no reply.

The realization that he was chasing his adversary around a non-existent track must have dawned on Gandos, for he suddenly cut across the inside of the circle in an attempt to head the Doctor off.

The Doctor smartly reversed course and started back the way he had come.

Gradually, Gandos came to a baffled, panting halt. Burdened as he was with axe and armour, he could not catch his lightly attired and armed opponent. He became aware of people jeering at him from the crowd. Nobody had ever done that. He looked up imploringly at his Mistress sitting in the box, but she could do nothing to aid him. If only he could get close to the man.

Then the cries of the crowd changed to a yell of satisfaction.

Gandos wiped the sweat from his eyes — and realized that his opponent was, finally, advancing towards him.

In the box, Cleopatra Selene leaned forward in her chair, her eyes blazing. 'Yes ... yes!' she hissed through clenched teeth. 'Kill him now!'

The two combatants clashed. Gandos's axe flashed in the sun and rebounded again from the Doctor's customized staff. The weighted staff-end crashed against Gandos's shield. A flurry of blows were exchanged, each blocked and countered in turn. The two sprang apart for a moment, axe still weaving, staff still twisting, as though each was seeking the weakness in the other. Then Gandos sprang forward with the surprising surge of power and speed that had won him so many bouts in the arena. His arm twisted and looped in mid-air, so that his swing turned from forehand to backhand, and his axe cut viciously and unexpectedly upwards towards the Doctor's side.

There was a rasp of metal ending in a grinding crunch.

The axe head was trapped in the cleft of the Doctor's staff, held fast by the saw-tooth blade. Using the full leverage of two metres of staff, the Doctor twisted the weapon from Gandos's grasp, and, before he could recover from the shock, jabbed the ball-end of his staff at his chin. Metal cracked against bone, and Gandos toppled backwards like a felled tree to sprawl senseless in the sand.

There was a moment's stunned silence, a collective in-drawing of breath.

Then the crowd went wild.

People were on their feet, stamping, waving fans and banners, and a chant rose and fell, reverberating around the great bowl and carrying out over the city: 'Doktor! Doktor!'

Waving his staff aloft, the Doctor made a triumphal circuit of the arena, bowing and waving graciously to the multitude.

Finally, he arrived below the Dictator's box. Alexander, still laughing and chiding a stone-faced Selene, turned to acknowledge him. He was too late. Ptolemy was on his feet and standing at the front of the box — and the Doctor bowed to him!

There was a confused lull in the applause, then somebody shouted:

'He's Ptolemy's man!' and the chant was picked up: 'Ptolemy! Doktor!

Ptolemy!'

Alexander froze, speechless. Cleopatra scowled, as though a possibility had just occurred to her.

'Forgive me for taking your place, Alexander,' said Ptolemy, resuming his seat, 'but you seemed preoccupied, and somebody had to respond to the man.'

'B—but ...' Alexander spluttered incredulously. 'They think he's *your* man now!'

'Why, so they do,' Ptolemy conceded calmly, eyeing the still-cheering crowds with interest. 'But then, he wasn't exactly yours to begin with, for that matter. Perhaps he's his *own* man, who simply happened to bow politely when I stood up.'

Alexander's trembling finger stabbed accusingly at him. 'You planned all of this!'

'My word on it,' Ptolemy interjected icily, 'and you know it is good; that I never knew of the man's existence until after you did yourself, and that this is the closest I have ever come to him. Besides, how could I have planned this outcome to the contest — unless I was in league with Selene,' he added significantly.

Alexander spun round to confront his sister. 'Is this true?' he demanded.

'Of course not!' she snapped back. 'Can't you see he's trying to confuse you?'

Alexander looked from one to the other of them in bewilderment, then gestured to Vitellius. 'Have Doktor brought up here at once!'

Vitellius departed, leaving Alexander hunched uncomfortably in his chair, gnawing at his knuckle nervously. Behind him, his retinue exchanged muted, embarrassed whispers.

Ptolemy's followers looked distinctly happier. Agricola, who had accompanied his father to the box, leaned forward and said to Ptolemy: 'That was a wonderful fight. There was no blood. I'm glad about that.' Ptolemy smiled understandingly at him.

Cleopatra Selene had sunk into a moment of deep thought. Now she appeared to come to a conclusion. She caught the eye of one of her maids, who came over to her. Nobody took any notice of the action, presuming she was asking for some refreshment, perhaps.

'Three,' she whispered in the maid's ear. The maid nodded and returned to the back of the box where another attendant sat with Cleopatra's cloak and personal items. The maid opened a small, decorated casket that might have contained perfumes and toilet items.

Inside was a plain box with a switch and indicator light, and a morse key mounted on it.

With her back to the rest of the box, the maid turned the switch and tapped out a quick call sign, twice repeated, then sent the number

'three'. After a few seconds, the bulb flashed three times in reply. She sent an acknowledgement code, then closed the box.

XXIV

'That was really fantastic, Doctor!' Peri exclaimed again over the comm-link.

'By the Gods, how you played him around!' exclaimed Paulinus, clasping the Doctor's hand enthusiastically.

The Doctor had returned to the preparation room after his triumphal circuit of the arena, and was being showered with congratulations from all sides. Gandos had been carried off by his own seconds to recover in another chamber. A *gladiatrix* contest had been put on to entertain the crowd, while the spaces left by Gandos's scheduled consecutive fights were filled. Fortunately, the female gladiators were as savage as any men could be, and, even as they spoke, were supplying the blood the Doctor's match had lacked. The roar of the crowd and the stamping of feet reverberated through the very structure of the building.

'I admit it,' continued Paulinus handsomely, 'I did bet on you —

don't know why, but I did.' He rubbed his hands together in venal anticipation. 'There's going to be a nice purse to collect there; what odds, eh!'

The Doctor paused in the act of washing the dust off, to comment:

'You deserve some credit yourself, Paulinus. You told me how dangerous Gandos was in close-quarter fighting, so I ensured he never got close enough, at least, not until I'd worn him down a little.'

'I realized what you were doing, but even so, I never saw anybody

fight like you did!

'Neither had Gandos,' remarked the Doctor dryly, 'that was the idea.'

A messenger appeared in the preparation room and spoke to Paulinus.

'Seems the triumvirate want to see you up in the box,' relayed Paulinus. 'Now watch out you don't do anything to offend *her* — she won't be any too pleased with you as it is, after what you did to her champion.'

The Doctor contrived a blameless expression. 'Oh, I'm sure she'll be perfectly amicable. Didn't she strike you so last night?'

Paulinus looked puzzled, his face contorting in the effort of recall.

'Yes, last night ... Er, odd thing, but I ... What happened again?'

'You fell asleep while we were chatting in my cell.'

'What!' Paulinus went white. 'Not while she was actually ...' The Doctor was nodding. Paulinus clutched his head and looked as though he was about to collapse.

'Don't worry,' the Doctor assured him cheerfully. 'I told her you'd been overdoing it a bit, and she was most sympathetic. Now, shall we be getting along? We don't want to keep all three of them waiting, do we?'

'Watch out, Doctor,' said Peri in his ear, as he and Paulinus tramped along the curving passageway towards the box. 'The Rani might try something.'

'Not in public, I think.'

'I sure hope not.'

The eye of every occupant of the box turned from the *gladiatrix* in the arena to the Doctor as he entered. Their expressions ranged from the admiring, through the simply curious, to the clearly resentful. The latter belonged mainly to Cleopatra's retinue. The Doctor, however, responded to all with the same bright, beaming smile, and bowed politely to the three leaders.

Alexander fixed him with a penetrating stare, his manner agitated.

'Your sly tricks have saved you once again, Doktor. Very well, you

have your pardon as I promised — if you tell me who put you up to it! Was it this man?' He stabbed a finger at Ptolemy.

The Doctor chose his words carefully. 'Nobody ever "puts me up"

to anything, Dictator. What I do, I do for my own reasons.'

'But you bowed to Caesarion; the crowd think you are *his* champion!'

'Sorry, was that wrong? I'm not too well-informed about arena etiquette' The Doctor's face showed only bland innocence.

Alexander's suspicions were not dispelled. He leaned closer to the Doctor, as though trying to read his thoughts. 'There is more to you than meets the eye, Doktor. What are you, and what is your purpose?'

The Doctor smiled slightly, his gaze flickering over Cleopatra for a moment. 'We all have our hidden depths,' he observed. 'As to my purpose, it is to see this land has a safe and peaceful future — and you may take that as the absolute truth!' The Doctor's eyes shone, and Alexander felt himself transfixed by their intensity. Yes, he could almost believe ...

Cleopatra Selene laughed mockingly.

'You will be a credulous fool if you listen to such talk, Brother.

Power or reward, that's all he wants. That is all anybody wants, if they would but admit it. He and Ptolemy are in league somehow, you may be sure.'

'I do not wish to usurp your position, Alexander,' said Ptolemy sincerely. 'All I ask for is some moderation in your actions and a willingness to accept what the world has become.'

'Do not listen to his wild stories!' warned Cleopatra.

'Sounds perfectly reasonable to me,' the Doctor opined.

'Be quiet, pleb!' exclaimed one of Alexander's followers.

' *Champion gladiator* pleb, if you please!' retorted the Doctor.

'Believe me, Alexander,' insisted Ptolemy, forcefully.

The objector from Alexander's retinue pushed forward and grabbed at Ptolemy, but the Doctor immobilized him with a nerve pinch, and he

sank limply to the ground.

Others of Alexander's party were on their feet, and found themselves facing Ptolemy's supporters. Pushes and shoves were exchanged and voices raised. Guards advanced uncertainly, unsure of how to handle the rowdy but distinguished brawlers.

'Shall I have the box cleared, Dictator?' shouted Vitellius.

'Don't ask him, just do it!' exclaimed Cleopatra, contemptuously.

Alexander had been turning bemusedly from one speaker to the next, while the words of entreaty and caution washed over him. As the scuffles began, he screwed his eyes shut and clutched his head.

Now he stood up and, with a dramatic gesture, threw up his hands.

His eyes were wide open again now, and there was a dangerous light in them, as though he was suddenly looking down on them from another plane.

'Be quiet!' he ordered clearly. 'In the name of the *Emperor*!'

The word seemed to hang, trembling, in the air. Tusslers froze in the act of grasping their opponents' robes. The chief magistrate of the city collapsed back in his chair, his mouth hanging open. Beside him, the High Priest of Serapis in Rome sat unmoving. The guards looked uncertainly at one another. Had they heard correctly?

The box became an island of silence amid the noisy multitude that packed the arena. Slowly, those in the seats nearest realized something momentous had happened. A few had overheard Alexander's words and passed them on. An urgent wave of whispers rolled out from either side of the box, and cries of encouragement to the combatants faded away into an anxious, intense hush. The two *gladiatrices*, realizing something was wrong, rested their swords and stood transfixed with the rest, panting from their exertions, their half-naked, blood- and sweat-streaked bodies no longer the centre of attention for seventy thousand people.

The Harena Maximus held its collective breath.

In the box, Alexander let his gaze travel slowly over the shocked tableau, conveying the feeling that he was not impressed by what he saw. There was a smile on his lips that had little to do with humour.

'Yes, you heard me. *Emperor*. My time has come at last. Today my divinity will be recognized. I was listening to all your foolish words, and wondering why I was so sorely troubled. Then I realized: I don't need to be any more. If I am Emperor by divine right, then it does not matter what you say or do, and any decision I make must be right, for my word will be absolute law, and what I say will be the truth. I *am* the truth!' He flung up his arms again dramatically to the heavens, and for a moment turned his face to the sky. Then he lowered his eyes to the gathering again, beaming beatifically, as though waiting for his rightful adulation.

Cleopatra regarded him with an oddly satisfied smile.

Ptolemy's face showed concern and sadness.

'Prove it,' the Doctor said simply.

There were murmurs of agreement from Ptolemy's supporters.

Alexander turned wild eyes on the Doctor. 'Prove it?' He gave a jerky, uneven laugh. 'You do not prove divinity. It is a birthright. It is my right to rule Rome — .'

'Not exclusively yours,' interjected the Doctor. 'Ptolemy Caesar has just as strong a claim as you. Perhaps a better one, as he is the elder.

If you wish to impose divine rule on Rome, then the laws of succession must be recognized, or else all will be lost.' His steady gaze passed over the assembly, as they considered the reason in his words. 'Do you want to risk another civil war?' he added ominously.

There were worried mutters, and a few shaking heads.

The man who the Doctor had temporarily immobilized had recovered sufficiently to protest: 'What right has this interloper to speak to us like this —' He stopped abruptly, because Paulinus had grasped him by the collar.

'We're listening because he's talking sense: said Paulinus, forcefully.

'Caesarion is not fit to rule!' Alexander hissed almost spitefully.

'Really?' The Doctor looked disbelieving. 'He seems quite fit enough to me. But then, dynastic rule has little to do with fitness, does it? As you said, it is a *birthright*. If you believe in it, then you must acknowledge the right of his prior claim to the throne. You have no choice.'

Alexander looked as though his world were crumbling about him.

'But there were signs, portents!' he protested, weakly. He turned to the Priest of Serapis, but the man seemed to be avoiding his eye.

'Then why not seek fresh signs now, before you tear the city apart with this dispute. You have plenty of worthy witnesses before you.'

The Doctor waved his hand over the occupants of the box. 'And you have a representative sample of the people themselves out there.' He indicated the attentive masses in the stadium, whose whispering relays of the conversation in the box echoed their words.

'How?' enquired Cleopatra, suspiciously.

'I will tell you how,' said Ptolemy, with dignity. 'Fate will choose between us in a form most suitable to the occasion. I will descend, unarmed, to the arena floor, if Alexander will accompany me, and the wolf pack may be released. As it was a wolf who suckled Romulus and Remus, and gave life to the progenitors of our kind, so wolves now shall decide who is the fitter to rule.' He turned to Alexander.

'Well ... will you join me?'

Alexander's eyes darted about, wildly seeking support or reassurance. His friends suddenly could not meet his gaze. Only Vitellius responded to his silent appeal: he gave a quick nod.

'Come,' said Ptolemy, 'this need not be to the death. Order your men to shoot the wolves, if they press too close. But only once their intent is clear, mind, or you have publicly renounced your claim.'

Again Alexander sought Vitellius's eyes, and again he saw the quick nod. Yes, he seemed to be telling him, this is the moment.

Alexander squared his shoulders.

His time had come.

The Gods would smile on him, and the people would know the truth. 'Very well, Caesarion, I shall accompany you.' He turned to the nervous announcer. 'Tell the people what we are about.'

Vitellius quickly stepped over to him, and said in an urgent whisper: 'Better to come from your own lips, Dictator — must be clear it's your decision.'

'Very well' Alexander approached the microphone, which the announcer hastily switched on for him.

'People of Rome!' His words echoed round the expectant stadium.

'My sole right to rule over you in the manner of an Emperor has been questioned. Rather than risk civil conflict, we shall let fate choose the fittest. Ptolemy Caesar and I shall enter the arena — and the wolves shall decide between us!'

There was a confused and incredulous clamour of voices about the arena. The two forgotten *gladiatrices* bowed uncertainly to the box, and hurried from the arena. Voices began to be raised in support of Alexander or Ptolemy.

As the two left the box, the Doctor watched the orders being given over an intercom to the beast-handlers, for the wolves to be brought up from their pens. He saw Paulinus looking at him despairingly, shaking his head. 'What have you started now?' he said. 'And why did I back you up! You and your words are dangerous things.'

'It had to be done, Paulinus. Things could not go on as they were, you know.'

'But this is madness!'

'Wait and see.'

Peri's anxious voice sounded in the Doctor's ear. 'I sure hope I mixed everything correctly ... '

'I hope I gave you the right formula,' the Doctor murmured.

As Ptolemy and Alexander approached the arena gate, Ptolemy surreptitiously popped the cap off a small vial, and sprinkled its contents over his tunic.

The crowd broke out into renewed cries as the two stepped out on the sand and made their way to the centre, separating as they went, until they were a good fifteen paces apart. Behind them, the gates in the arena wall and the inner fence clanged shut. They stood facing the gate from which the animals were released. The double fence doors were pulled inward, closing the gap between the fence and the arena wall. The gate behind them slid aside, revealing a dark opening beyond. There came the sound of growling, and a sudden yelp of pain. A large grey wolf slunk out of the gate and onto the sand. More

squeals and snapping came from the darkness, and others followed, emerging into the sunlight uncertainly, their lean bellies scraping the ground, their heads turning to and fro in confusion. In moments, a pack of a dozen animals had emerged, and the gates closed behind them.

In the box, Vitellius's guards readied their rifles. The Doctor saw other guards filing out into the run between the fence and arena walls.

For a minute, the wolf pack milled about, circling the walls, confused by their surroundings. Alexander and Ptolemy stood their ground in the centre of the ring, watching and waiting. Gradually, the wolves seemed to gain confidence, and began to take notice of the two men. Saliva dripped from their hungry jaws. They started to edge cautiously towards them, pawing the ground, dropping into hunting crouches, snarling, hackles rising.

And Ptolemy stepped boldly towards them.

There was an anticipatory intake of breath from the crowd.

The lead wolf sniffed the air uncertainly. Its snarl changed tone.

Another sniff and it started to whine. The rest of the pack halted their advance, exchanging barks of confusion. Gradually, they began to back away from Ptolemy.

A rising murmur of wonder began to swell in the crowd.

One of the flanking wolves, circling clear of Ptolemy, closed upon Alexander. Defiantly he faced it down, gesturing imperiously: 'Back!

I command you, in the name of the Emperor!' For a moment, the beast hesitated, sniffing the air cautiously. Then it continued its approach. Alexander took an uncertain step backwards. The wolf gathered itself and sprang, knocking Alexander to the ground, and they rolled over in a flurry of sand, kicking and clawing.

Ptolemy sprinted over to the struggling pair and tore the wolf off Alexander, driving it away with kicks and punches. Ptolemy helped a clawed and bloody Alexander to his feet. Cheers began to rise from the crowd, orchestrated by Cassodorus's men: 'Ptolemy! Ptolemy!'

The wolf pack started to circle them; they could smell blood and fear now, and it was overcoming the effects of the Doctor's animal repellant.

Alexander clung to Ptolemy in terror, his nerve gone. 'Take it!' he screamed wildly. 'Take it all! I renounce my claim, do you hear?

Ptolemy can have it all, do you hear me, Vitellius? The signs were wrong!' The wolves started to close in on them. 'Shoot them! Tell your men to shoot, Vitellius!'

In the box, Vitellius stepped up to the microphone.

'Janus begins *now*!'

And as one man, the guards in the box turned their rifles to cover the followers of Alexander and Ptolemy.

There was a stunned silence.

'Janus?' said Peri in the Doctor's ear.

'The god of peace — but he has two faces.'

'No pointless heroism,' warned Vitellius loudly. 'These are my guards, remember — my chosen guards.'

Cleopatra smiled at the Doctor in triumph.

'Not quite as we intended, and a little earlier than planned, but perfectly satisfactory in the end.'

A faint droning noise could be heard in the far distance.

Booted feet pounded over the heads of the confused crowd. Lifting their eyes, they saw armed guards filing out along the top of the broad entablature that capped the colonnade ringing the outer wall of the arena. Within moments they were in place, their field of fire commanding the whole interior of the amphitheatre. Those people nearest the many stairways opening out amongst the seats, tried to escape down them, but found guards already in position. People shouted and milled about, but they were helpless.

The droning slowly grew louder.

The ring of wolves circled Ptolemy and Alexander, gradually edging closer.

Cleopatra took over the microphone.

'People of Rome, I do not put my trust in fate. Unlike those two you

see cowering helplessly on the sand before you, I trust in strength. Shortly, you will see a sample of my strength. Listen, you can hear it approaching even now ... As you watch your would-be rulers die, think hard on who is best suited to rule both Rome and the Dominion.'

Vitellius spoke over the intercom to the beast-handlers. 'The wolves seem hesitant. Release all the animals into the arena — now!'

Confused shouts sounded at the other end, then came a grudging assent. Vitellius turned, smiling, to the captive audience in the box.

'My men are in charge of all key levels of the arena — as they are elsewhere. It will be a bloodless take-over, as long as the people behave sensibly.'

'Why use the animals to do your dirty work?' demanded Paulinus.

'Too cowardly to do it yourself?'

'Just what was the scheme, Vitellius?' the Doctor enquired, playing for time.

Vitellius beamed in self-satisfaction. 'Alexander had to be seen to bring ruin upon himself. We don't want the lingering memory of a worthy ruler inspiring any future dissent. Ptolemy almost managed to upset the plan, escaping Alexander's assassins. Naturally, Alexander would have been implicated for that in due course — much to his surprise, no doubt, as he intended his sister should take the blame.

But there's no need now. They'll both die, rather ignobly, without any human hand touching them. If they believe in the judgement of Fate, let it save them.'

The droning was much louder now.

Peri's voice spoke in the Doctor's ear. She sounded angry and very determined. 'Right! I've seen enough. Hold on, Doctor, I'm coming!

I'll think of something—' The link went dead.

'I'm not standing for this!' hissed Paulinus out of the side of his mouth, as Vitellius joined Cleopatra in watching the spectacle down in the ring. 'Maybe he's not much, but as long as he's given up trying to be an Emperor, then it's my duty to protect him.'

The Doctor surreptitiously adjusted his morphic resonator wristband

again. 'Careful, m'dear chap,' he whispered back. 'Don't do anything foolish. There may be a distraction in a minute or two, and we'd best be ready for it.'

Alexander's retinue looked lost and confused by the sudden coup, while Ptolemy's supporters fumed impotently under the rifles of the guards. 'We must help Ptolemy, father,' Agricola wailed. 'We can't leave him to the beasts ... Not them ...' His father clasped his shoulder reassuringly, but his face was bleak. Nobody except the guards carried weapons into the box. They were helpless.

Through the awning masts, the grey torpedo forms of airships glided into view. The droning resolved itself into the notes of dozens of aero-engines, and suddenly swelled as the craft passed directly overhead. Half a dozen huge airships could be seen, all bearing the markings of the Eastern Dominion. But flying between them were smaller, winged craft, by comparison seeming like gnats escorting a shoal of salmon. Even as they watched, a plane dropped out of a cavernous hold in the underside of one of the airships and swooped away to join its fellows.

'See, my carrier fleet of the air,' continued Cleopatra over the loudspeakers. 'These are the new heavier-than-air craft we have made in the East. *There* is my power ... '

One of the planes dived deliberately low over the arena, revealing itself to be a two-man biplane with winged sun and eye markings in gold and blue. The Doctor noted grimly the machine-gun mounts on the cowling and the rear cockpit. The crowd in the arena flinched and gasped at the flyover, unwillingly impressed by the speed and manoeuvrability of the new aircraft. The sound frightened the wolves in the arena, and they scattered to the walls, giving Alexander and Ptolemy a brief reprieve.

Through the masts that topped the arena wall, the Doctor saw the *Horus*, which had lifted to join the fleet, come to a halt, and lines drop from its hatches. The tiny shapes of soldiers started sliding down them into the city.

Within moments there came the sound of gunfire. Some of the planes circling overhead turned away over the city and disappeared behind the arena walls. There was a breathless pause, then the distant boom of exploding bombs started to rumble like thunder. Scattered defiant cheering broke out; Rome was fighting back.

'You're not having it all your own way, Selene!' Ptolemy shouted from

the ring. 'The city deserves better than this.'

'I'll forgive you if you let me go!' Alexander cried desperately. 'We can share the rule — I know a secret of great power!'

'You have nothing to bargain with, brother,' Cleopatra retorted over the speakers. 'I know all about *Ultimus*. I don't need you ...' She turned aside, but the microphone still caught her impatient words:

'Why don't the wolves attack? Where are the rest of the beasts? They must die *now*?"

Cowering despairingly with the rest of the crowd, Cassodorus was horrified to hear himself shout out in reflex: 'Fair fight!' He clamped his hand over his mouth and huddled down, hoping the guards hadn't seen. But somebody bolder, and braver, picked up the call: 'Fair fight!'

The call spread, rising and falling, to echo round the arena.

Cassodorus could see the groups led by Decius and Tiro responding, waving their banners again. The people might not be able to fight back, but they could protest. The guards on the walls hesitated, finding it hard to pick out individual targets amongst the swaying and gesticulating masses.

Around the curve of the amphitheatre from Cassodorus, Rufinus pushed his way down towards the lower seats nearer the ring, taking advantage of the sudden confusion. If only he could get within throwing range ...

Cassodorus popped his head up, shouted: 'Rome for the Romans!

Rome for the Romans!' and ducked down again. This was a chant that both Ptolemy and Alexander's factions could join in.

There was a clanking of gates and roar of fresh animal sounds as more beasts were released. Several big cats appeared, followed by bears and a rhino. The wolves that had been snapping at Alexander and Ptolemy drew back, snarling at these newcomers. The two men took their chance and ran for the arena wall. Rifle shots rang out, kicking up spurts of sand at their feet, and they halted. The crowd jeered the guards.

'You see how futile are their efforts,' Cleopatra said over the speakers, having to raise her voice. 'How easily they have let themselves be trapped. It is only a matter of time ...' The protesting cries of the

crowd drowned her next words.

Not as easy as you thought, is it?' shouted the Doctor.

'Congratulations, you've managed to unite *everybody* against you!'

Amongst the jeering multitude, Strabo stood pounding a massive fist into his palm. 'We gotta do something,' he kept repeating.

Beside him, Themos tried to concentrate. His experience of civil insurrection was limited, but surely this was a problem capable of resolution like any other. A mass of people with the will to act, but hemmed in by guards and lacking effective weapons. The guards above them were out of reach, but at least they might be able to deal with those below. 'The seats!' he suddenly shouted, pulling Strabo down so he could shout in his ear. 'The seats are made of panels.

They must come free!'

A broad smile of comprehension split Strabo's lumpy features. He twisted about and examined the marble slab that formed his seat.

Metal cramps held it in place. His steel-trap fingers tore at flattened cramp heads, forcing them open. Then he gripped the slight lip of the seat and heaved. Metal grated on stone and suddenly the slab jerked free, revealing the rough concrete support underneath. He dashed his liberated slab edge-on against the floor panel of the row above, cracking it across the middle. The broken pieces came loose easily, and he scooped them up and started down the steps towards the ring.

The people on either side saw what he had done, and started clawing at their own seats. It was easier once the first slabs were free.

Rufinus forced his way through the milling aristocrats who traditionally occupied the lower seats, and reached the rail guarding the drop down into the run between the inner and outer ring walls.

Animals were fighting each other in the ring, and perhaps the confusion had given the two men a few precious extra seconds. But now they were trapped between the wolves on one side and a brace of tigers on the other. Rufinus pulled out the package he had concealed under his cloak and unwrapped his old legion sword and revolver. It was long range for a handgun, but he blazed away at the cats until he winged one and got Ptolemy's attention. A shot from the guards above knocked a chip off the stonework at his side, but he ignored it even as the people around him ducked for cover. He caught up the sword,

swung back his arm and threw it spinning and flashing out into the ring towards Ptolemy.

There was a new cheer from the crowd.

Bullets splashed into the stonework and Rufinus dived into the angle of the seats. He fumbled in his cloak for the other memento of his legion days.

The sword dropped onto the sand ten paces from Ptolemy. He sprinted towards it with Alexander hard at his heels. One of the tigers bounded after them and sprang. With a scream, Alexander went down beneath it. Ptolemy snatched up the sword, spun around and lunged at the beast as it tore into his half—brother's body. His sword plunged deep between the tiger's ribs and withdrew red and glistening. The creature howled in pain, then convulsed and rolled off its victim.

Alexander lay still.

There was an explosion between the arena walls, and a cloud of smoke billowed into the air. Rufinus's other memento of the past had been a box of grenades. He'd always thought they might be useful one day. Guards ran along the channel between the walls towards the commotion and were knocked to the ground by a barrage of heavy stone seat-slabs hurled from above. People started to drop over the wall. Some had swords. Soon they would have rifles.

In the ring, a wolf sprang upon Ptolemy as he bent over the body of Alexander. He turned and swung at it so fiercely its head was severed from its shoulders. 'Ptolemy! Ptolemy!' the chant grew louder. There was a terrible hissing roar, and a monstrous shape slithered into the arena from the beast pens. It was a hydra. Its twin heads whipped about in confusion. The other beasts backed away from it.

Vitellius turned frantically to Cleopatra. 'We're losing control! Call the *Horus* down to pick us up!'

Cleopatra's eyes flashed scorn at him. 'We are not losing control!'

There was a new wave of shouts from the crowd. A party of gladiators led by Cynon surged through a gate and into the ring, pursued by guards. Knots of fighting men spilled out onto the sand, and the clash of steel mixed with the roar of the beasts. Spurts of sand were kicked up as the guards on the top wall started firing down upon them.

'See, the men on the walls will take care of them.'

The Doctor's eyes flicked upward, and he saw a winged form swoop across the sky. Then Peri was hovering with beating wings over the heavy circular rigging line that held the inner edges of the awning panels taut.

'I don't think they will,' he said.

Peri's arm struck downwards.

With a crack and whip the line parted.

Dozens of panels of sailcloth ripped loose and flapped heavily back against their masts and the colonnade wall. Suddenly, the commanding ring of guards deployed along its summit could no longer see the people they were shooting at, because of several thousand square yards of inconveniently draped fabric.

The guards in the box turned to look out, distracted by the sudden dramatic movement.

The Doctor and Paulinus leapt upon the two nearest ...

Glabrio pulled a pistol from the concealment of his robes ...

In a moment, the box was filled with struggling men. More shots rang out. Swords clashed. Cleopatra, Vitellius and a small group of their followers began to back away towards the exit. Agricola picked up a fallen sword and made for the front of the box. For the first time in years, he felt himself thinking clearly. All that mattered was to get to Ptolemy. He wouldn't leave him alone again. He hacked at a loop of the box's rich hangings — he needed a rope.

Cleopatra's party reached the door and were able to fire down on those left in the box. The Doctor felt the wind of a bullet fan his cheek, and twisted aside, throwing up his arms automatically.

Something smashed into his wrist with stinging force. Paulinus, fighting at his side, suddenly reeled and cannoned into him, sending them both sprawling.

Paulinus was gasping, blood bubbling from his lips. 'Never will ...

collect my winnings now ... '

And the Doctor saw his own arm, and the bullet scar across his leather wristband — and spilling out from under it, the tiny shattered

components of the morphic resonator.

XXV

Peri swooped into the Dictator's box like a dark avenging angel.

She tucked her legs up in mid-air, folding her ankle winglets flat, and dived feet-first into the last knot of Vitellius's guards remaining in the box, knocking them into a confused heap.

She had a brief glimpse of Cleopatra's startled face, before the doors at the rear of the box were slammed shut.

Peri hovered above a frozen tableau of amazed faces. 'Don't just stand there!' she admonished. 'You've got a city to defend, haven't you?' Then she saw the Doctor sprawled in a corner. In an instant, she had dropped to the ground beside him. He twitched and tossed his head as though he was falling into a bad dream. The broken components of the resonator were trailing from his wristband. His features blurred and began to change ...

She bent over and scooped him up into her arms. She had to get him back to the TARDIS as soon as possible. Agricola was by her side, holding a length of drapery like a rope, looking at her again in delight and wonder.

'I've got to get the Doctor somewhere safe,' she said quickly, 'but I'll be back, I promise.'

He nodded. 'I'm going to help Ptolemy.' Her wings spread and with a rush of air she took off. 'What's your name?' he called out after her.

'Peri!' she shouted back.

Agricola smiled; he ran back to the front of the box, and started tying the improvised rope to the rail. The ring was a confused mass of fighting men and animals.

Somewhere in the centre was Ptolemy. He wouldn't leave him this time.

Smoke rose in black columns from a dozen fires scattered across the city. Beyond the walls, Peri could see the wreckage of at least three of the smaller Roman airships burning on the airfield. High overhead circled the great bulks of Cleopatra's airships, keeping clear of any ground fire, and dropping bombs on outlying military installations.

Lower down were the fighters, buzzing like wasps over the city, tiny flickers of orange flame spouting from their gun muzzles as they strafed smaller targets.

The day wasn't going quite as anyone had planned, she thought.

Peri flew determinedly on, cradling the Doctor in her arms. Behind her, one airship drifted across the city to come to a halt beside the arena.

Cleopatra's party emerged from the arches of the arena to find the great bulk of the *Horus* filling the sky of the deserted street outside, its gimballed engines roaring as they angled against the breeze, holding the ship steady. A net-sided cargo platform was resting on the ground, suspended on lines from the airship's forward hatch. A recovered Gandos, sporting a large bruise on his jaw, was already standing beside it. His eyes dropped in shame as he saw his mistress.

The party piled into the platform and Cleopatra grabbed the intercom microphone that communicated with the *Horus*'s control cabin. 'Maxentius, did you get it?' she demanded anxiously.

'Yes, Majesty. There was some resistance —.'

'Never mind that. This is what you do now ... '

Peri flew on over the rooftops heading for the tomb, her wings beating heavily. She could feel the strain of carrying another person at speed. Whatever the source of her ability, she prayed it would sustain her for just another minute more, and that none of the fighters would see them.

In her arms, the Doctor muttered: 'Brave heart, Peri ...'

Then she felt his body squirm and shiver in her grasp in some indescribable way, and she almost dropped him. The wind-blown flaxen hair of the Doctor she had first known seemed to curl and fill out. His boyish features blurred and distorted again. Suddenly she was carrying an older man with an unruly mop of dark curled hair, a beaky nose and crinkled lines around his eyes — one of which suddenly and disconcertingly blinked wide open.

'Hello, I'm the Doctor,' he said brightly.

'I guessed that,' said Peri, despairingly. This was worse than before, she thought. She'd found her alternate point of stability, but where

was the Doctor's? 'Please try to hang on. I'm getting you to the TARDIS as fast as I can.'

The eye rolled expressively in its socket before focusing on her again. 'Are we flying?'

' *I'm* flying; you're a passenger. You've changed again. Oh, hell ... '

The Doctor's hair whitened; his features became more craggy and cheerfully lined; his nose grew distinguishedly prominent. His eyes flickered open again. 'Ah, hallo, my dear. Did rather well against Gandos, didn't I?'

'What? Oh, sure. Look, Doctor — .'

The Doctor frowned. 'Paulinus — what happened to him?'

'Sorry ... I think he's dead.'

'Oh, poor chap.'

'Doctor! What happens when you run out of bodies? Oh no!'

The little man with the gentle, puckish face and dark, Beatle-hairstyle, looked about him anxiously. 'Oh dear,' he exclaimed in a tremulous voice, 'this is all rather unsettling.'

'For you and me both!' Peri said with feeling. The tomb was in sight, but she wasn't certain she'd reach it in time. 'Doctor, how many bodies have you got left? And what happens then?'

'Ah ... Well, actually — I'm not sure. Probably best not to find out, really ... '

Peri dropped out of the sky towards the temple roof with relief.

The sprightly old man with the flowing white hair and diamond-bright eyes, who she set down a few paces from the hole in the pyramid roof, immediately turned and waved her impatiently away.

'Will you manage to get back to the ship from here?' she asked anxiously. 'Only I must get back to help Ptolemy.'

'Of course you must,' he responded brusquely. 'Don't worry about me, child. I had this body longer than any; I'll master it yet. If the TARDIS is suitably charged, I'll attempt to track down the Rani's TARDIS, and then ... We shall see. Now, be off with you, and don't do anything

foolish!' And he turned and ducked through the hole in the pyramid wall.

The spear thrust past Ptolemy into the chest of one of the Praetorians who faced him. He hacked at the other, cutting deep into his sword arm, and the man staggered away, clutching his wound.

Ptolemy turned to find Agricola by his side, blood-streaked but triumphant, changing a sword over to his good arm to replace the spear. 'I didn't run away this time,' he gasped. His eyes were purposeful and more knowing than they had been in years. Ptolemy clasped his hand in delight. Then they turned to face their next adversary together.

The fighter plane dived at Peri, its engine note rising ominously, its forward machine gun chattering. Just like in the movies, she thought wildly, banking to one side to avoid the stream of lead and glowing tracer bullets. What its pilot thought she was, she could not imagine, but nobody was going to shoot at her and get away with it!

Peri scooped the air with her wings, braking, and the plane shot over her head. She accelerated after it, keeping the tailplane between her and the rear gunner, buffeted by the craft's slipstream. It tried to gain height to escape her, but she determinedly closed in. She reached out and grasped the tailplane, her talons sinking into the fabric. The gunner was gesticulating madly to the pilot, but he could not shoot at her without damaging his plane. With her free hand she unclipped the hand unit of the molecular cutter she had used to sever the arena rigging line. She could see control wires running out of the fuselage and over small struts, which gave leverage to work the rudder and elevators. She slashed at them, and the control surfaces suddenly flapped uselessly.

The plane started a long, slow, rolling dive, heading out over the city walls. Peri tumbled free and fell behind the doomed craft, watching the crew bail out. Their parachutes blossomed open, and they began to drift down to the war-torn city. She didn't think their landing would be a happy one.

The huge shadow of the *Horus* rolled over the arena, blotting out the sun and bringing an unnatural half-light with it. The droning roar of its engines reverberated around the amphitheatre, driving the maddened animals to howl and snarl more wildly than before, and drawing new cries of alarm and uncertainty from the fighting populace.

The cargo platform swung down out of the sky over the ring, manned by Gandos and a dozen soldiers. Vitellius's surviving guards, thinking they were being rescued, tried to battle their way towards the platform. But it had not come for them. The soldiers on the platform fired indiscriminately into the mêlée in the ring at friend, foe and beast alike, clearing a way for them to grind to earth in the bloodstained sand.

The soldiers leaped from the platform towards Ptolemy and Agricola.

The Doctor tottered through the doors of the TARDIS with the last of his strength, staggered to the console, pressed the door control almost by reflex, and sagged over the instruments as they swung smoothly closed.

He felt the confusion and disorientation of the multiple retro-regenerations weighing upon him. It was the burden, not of his age, but of his heritage. He knew Peri did not understand why she had found a stable pattern more easily than he. Before life had appeared on Earth, his people had experimented with their genetic structure, mastering the secret of regeneration. But there had been a price, he thought — there always was.

The nausea washed over him again. He saw his own hands change, the wrinkles smoothing out as the TARDIS's morphic field forced his body back through his first regeneration. He wanted desperately to rest, but he did not have time.

That was ironic. Normally he could have kept the TARDIS in transit as long as he wished, and no time would have passed elsewhere. But within an alien micro-universe and short of power, he could not risk more than a few minutes, relatively speaking, before materializing again.

He checked the power levels. Was there enough? Barely. He crossed his fingers and activated the manual override on the mass converter. Deep within the TARDIS, the shells of empty and forgotten chambers were collapsed and fed into the converter. Matter became energy. The lights on the console brightened as the auxiliary functions returned. The Doctor clapped his hands together in delight, his feet twitching to the memory of an ancient jig. Halfway through, he changed again, and had to support himself against the console.

This won't do, he told himself firmly, running a hand through his curly white hair. He adjusted the controls and set the long-range

detectors to work.

Peri saw the *Horus* rise up from the arena as she approached. What had it been doing? The craft soared away to join the rest of the fleet.

As she watched, puffs of black smoke started bursting around one of the airships. Rome obviously had some sort of anti-aircraft weapons, and somebody had wrested them from the control of Vitellius's men.

The vulnerable airships started to pull away from the city, leaving the fighters to continue the attack.

She dived down to the ring where she had last seen Ptolemy.

The amphitheatre was half empty now The guards on the stairs had retreated when Vitellius and Cleopatra had run, leaving the inner wall guards trapped between the people, the beasts and the gladiators. The last pockets of these were being subdued as she arrived.

Peri felt sick as she flew low over the carnage of the ring, ignoring the cries of surprise her reappearance caused, searching for Ptolemy.

Perhaps he had reached the seats or the box? She hoped so.

Then she saw Agricola.

He was lying amid a bloody mass of bodies, both human and animal. He still held a sword in his hand. A cold knot of grief twisted in her stomach as she dropped down beside him. One look at his many wounds was enough to tell he was dying. Gently, she cradled him in her arms, ignoring the blood that seeped onto her feathers.

Agricola's eyes slowly focused on her. 'Didn't run away this ... time

...' he said faintly.

'No, you've been ... very brave ...' she choked. 'Where's ... Where's Ptolemy?'

'Gandos ... soldiers ... took him in ... airship. Must find him ... '

'I will, I promise.'

'Feel ... tired ... '

'Rest. You've made everything right now ... You don't have to feel guilty any more. You've done your duty. Go to sleep ... '

Agricola gently grew heavy in her arms and was still.

Peri realized there were now people close by, pointing a miscellany of weapons uncertainly at her. She wiped away her tears, and looked into the face of a man whose agonized expression left no doubt who he was.

'Your son died very bravely,' she said simply to Gaius Agricola.

She took a deep breath. 'Now I am going after Ptolemy Caesar and the people who did this.' She laid Agricola carefully down and rose.

There was a nervous shuffle away from her as she unfolded and spread her wings.

'What ... who are you?' asked a distinguished old man with a commanding air.

'A friend of Ptolemy's. Are you Senator Glabrio?' Peri demanded.

'Yes, but how —.'

'Never mind. You'd better take charge here, if you haven't already.

Do ...' She hesitated. 'Do whatever you have to do. I've got an airship to catch.'

Her wings beat down with a determined thump, and she took off in a swirl of sand and dust.

The TARDIS materialized into a dimly lit chamber that looked very similar to one of its own rooms, having the same patterns of recessed roundels on the walls. The doors of the TARDIS opened and the Doctor, back to his proper incarnation once more, peered out cautiously. The room was still and quiet. He beamed in satisfaction, and stepped outside, pulling on his multi-coloured coat as he went.

The tangles of cables and makeshift control panels strewn about the room were evidence of the repairs and improvisations the Rani had been forced to undertake. He examined them for a moment with grudging admiration for her ingenuity. There was an arch in one wall, which looked as though it should lead to another compartment. Set within it, however, was a crude metal framework linked to wires and several pieces of haywire circuitry, enclosing a panel that was totally black except for the shape of an ornate full-length mirror silhouetted in the middle. The Doctor nodded to himself in understanding; a short

range transfer interface, with minimal directional control. No wonder she had not risked using it to gain access to the Oracle directly — it looked highly unsafe.

Looking through it he saw the interior of Cleopatra's stateroom in the *Horus*. He twisted about, without touching the surface, trying to see all round the cabin. It seemed empty.

He continued his rapid exploration. In one corner of the room, a rectangular storage module had been laid on its side and its lid removed. The Doctor peered inside — and found himself staring at the tranquil features of the real Cleopatra Selene.

She was clearly deep in an induced sleep. Wires ran from contacts taped to her head and body, to a piece of equipment resembling his own TARDIS's morphic stabilizer unit. This was how the Rani was maintaining her counterfeit body pattern. He was tempted to break the connections on the spot, but he counselled himself to be patient.

Another archway led out of the control room into a short corridor.

As he entered it, he thought he could hear a faint voice. He frowned, and walked a few steps. The voice got louder. It seemed to come from a room just ahead, the entrance of which showed nothing but darkness. Moving silently, he crept up and peered within.

'Sky turns, low pressure region crosses big sea ... Winds grow stronger, change direction ... '

The voice rumbled from somewhere unseen, suggesting a gentle giant plodding through some weary rote. But the Doctor was more fascinated by what he saw in the middle of the room.

Hanging in the blackness was a delicate misty sphere formed by thousands of pin-points of light. Within the sphere was what appeared to be an intricately patterned dome, coloured in blues and greens and whirls of white, and lit by a bright yellow point of light hovering over its surface.

Intrigued, the Doctor took a step forward —

And found there was no floor in the room.

He twisted round as he started to fall and grasped the doorframe, hanging by his fingertips with his feet being gently drawn towards the dome. His skin tingled as though he were halfway through a pressure

curtain.

A sense of proportion asserted itself. This was no room. The archway opened out directly into the void of the micro-universe. The coloured dome was actually the copied Earth-segment viewed from thousands of miles directly overhead. He'd almost taken the longest step of his life.

The voice stopped talking to itself, and the Doctor had a sense that something huge but unseen had just drawn closer.

The force field of the pressure curtain vibrated, transmitting the being's words through the air:

'Oh, who you? You not *her*; you *new*!'

Peri pursued the retreating *Horus* with cold determination, arrowing through the air with all the force she could muster, willing each beat of her wings to drive her faster. The matter had become personal. If she could feel this bad about the death of somebody she had only known through a sad story and a few minutes of actual contact, then she wasn't about to let it happen to anyone closer.

There was the flash of an explosion in the distance on her right, as the anti-aircraft fire found a target.

The airship seemed to crumple, its back breaking as gas cells burst one after another. Tongues of orange flame licked across its skin, and it started the long fall to earth. The sound of the rumbling explosions reached her seconds later.

Perversely, she was momentarily elated by the spectacle of Rome fighting back against the invaders. Then she thought of the men dying as she watched, and went cold again. This had to be stopped now!

She would rescue Ptolemy if humanly possible. If Cleopatra/Rani crossed her path in doing so ... Well, she would think of something.

Vitellius strode through the cabin door of Cleopatra's stateroom, his face contorted with barely contained anger. Gandos followed, pushing a dazed and bloody Ptolemy before him. Ptolemy's hands were bound behind his back. Cleopatra appeared in the corridor, directing a party of crewmen who were carrying the Oracle between them. The top and base sections had been separated, but it was still a tight fit through the relatively narrow doorway. Cleopatra seemed to be fearful lest the Oracle suffer any damage, and she berated the men mercilessly for

causing the slightest scrape.

Vitellius fought to maintain his composure. Get rid of the men first, he thought, then she will find out what I think of her actions.

The Doctor stood in the corridor facing the black void of the micro-universe. 'Don't you understand?' he implored. 'You've got to take responsibility for what you've created.'

'Created?' pondered the creature. 'No, not created. Me not create, me read and write.'

'It means the same thing. The people down there only exist because of what you did. Now you've got to take care of them properly.'

'Am taking care of them,' the creature insisted. 'Am keeping them warm, and keeping air around them, and keeping them from going over edge of world. Make sure all the animals, even the mixed-up ones, stay alive.'

'But you can't go on like that for ever. They need a whole world of their own — even the mixed—up ones!'

' *She* says me have to, or else she says she leave me all alone forever. She leave me for time not long ago. It was bad. But me learn to make things happen down there, to *write* things. And learn to feel all the little lives going on. That nice' It paused. 'Maybe,' it hazarded rebelliously, 'if *she* go away, I go to world forever. Never be alone ever again, me!'

'"I",' corrected the Doctor automatically. ' "I will never be alone again." '

'What mean "I"?'

'It's the sound you use when talking about yourself. If you tell somebody your name, you say: I am called ... What *is* your name, by the way?'

The creature was experimenting, curiously. 'I am called ... I am called ... Called I am ... Iam ... I am called Iam!'

The Doctor did not argue. 'Pleased to meet you, Iam. Now, about the world —.'

'You nice. You tell me what things mean. She just say do this, do that,

or I leave you.' There was a thoughtful pause. 'Tell me ... tell *I*, what "fool" means?'

The Doctor sighed. He hadn't much time and he was getting caught up in a language lesson. But it was hard to be angry with the creature

— with Iam. 'A fool is someone who is stupid, who gets something wrong, who can't do what they're told properly.'

There was an ominous rumbling from the blackness. 'Urrgh! That not nice. She called me fool. Me. I only did what she asked. She not say properly. Not my fault! I am not fool!'

'I'm sure you're not,' the Doctor interjected quickly. 'So what about showing her you're not a fool by doing something really clever?'

'What?' Iam asked doubtfully.

'Make a real, *complete* world for all those people down there. A world just like their old one, but orbiting a new sun in real space.'

'Hmmm,' Iam pondered. 'Never made whole world before. That a lot of writing.'

'I can give you all the details, all the information on how the world should be made up.'

'Information?'

'Yes; you'll know what almost everything means then!'

'That nice. But I don't want to be alone again.'

'You won't have to be. You can leave here once you've shaped the new world.'

'Leave ... here?'

'Yes. With what you've already learned, you should be able to pass through the interface around your universe when you drop the new world into real space. Didn't you realize you could leave?'

'She never said I could leave. She said she would leave *me*!'

The Doctor's face pinched in anger. 'I might have known! lam, believe me: once you have set things right, you can go where you like. You will have discharged your responsibility for what you did to these

people. You'll be free. There's ...' The Doctor paused, aware of an imminent and apparently unavoidable cliche. 'There's a whole new universe out there just waiting for you!'

Peri landed flat on the great grey expanse of the *Horus*'s fuselage, spread-eagling herself and digging in the talons on her fingers and toes against the slipstream. She gasped for breath. She was exhausted.

Her wings and shoulders ached, and she felt a strange tiredness deep within herself, as though she had been drawing on a source of energy more quickly than it could be replenished. Probably she was; she just wished she understood the mechanism better. Certainly it proved she was no superbeing, anyway. Perhaps it was best that way.

Clawing at the fabric skin, she began to work her way over the curve of the hull and down towards the control and passenger decks.

'What did you mean by risking everything to recover this!' Vitellius stabbed an accusing finger at the Oracle. It had been reassembled inside the stateroom and the crew had departed. Cleopatra was running her hands across the intricate device almost lovingly, paying scant attention to Vitellius's tirade. Gandos stood with his accustomed immobility in the corner, while Ptolemy was slumped, sick and exhausted on a couch.

'Do you realize,' Vitellius continued, 'that by having this ship raid the Oracle Temple, you caused the fighting to start outside the arena?

Why couldn't you have waited, if you wanted it so much? That's when everything started to go wrong —.'

'No!' countered Cleopatra, raising commanding green eyes to meet his angry gaze, causing him to flinch away from her. 'Where it started going wrong, was in the inaccurate intelligence you gave me about the level of popular support for Ptolemy.'

'Well, how was I to know about it?' Vitellius protested. 'It only happened in the last few days. After the years I spent encouraging Alexander in his delusions, pushing him towards the point where he'd do something foolish — which he did — how could I know Ptolemy was going to step in and play the hero?' He sneered. 'Anyway, whose champion was supposed to win the day in the arena, and impress the people with the power of the East? How could I know Ptolemy had this Doktor on his side? And what of the harpy thing — am I to blame for that?'

Cleopatra became sullen at the mention of the Doctor, and returned to admiring the Oracle. Vitellius decided to try a new tack.

'Selene,' he said gently, let us not fight over this. 'We still have much to do, if the attack on the city is to be maintained until the surface fleet arrives.'

'That hardly matters now,' Cleopatra said, dismissively. 'It would have been simpler to have taken the city as we planned, but now I have the Oracle and Ptolemy, there are better ways.'

Vitellius frowned. 'We will not have time to learn anything new from the Oracle if we do not conquer Rome within a few days. Even with Ptolemy as a hostage, they still have *Ultimus*, and others besides Alexander know about it.'

'Oh, I don't want Ptolemy as a hostage. I have a better and subtler use for him — his body at least. Now he has made himself so popular, I will turn it to my purposes. I *will* rule this world,' she smiled, 'in one form or another.'

None of this made sense to Vitellius, but her last words bothered him. ' *We*,' he corrected her gently. 'We will rule together.' He smiled and caught her about the waist, pulling her close. 'Remember last year in Alexandria? The plans we made, the nights we spent together?'

She laughed mockingly. 'All only a memory, fortunately, and not even mine.' She looked at him clinically for a moment, as though assessing the worth of something that had crawled out from under a stone. 'You convinced yourself you had made a conquest. How like a man. But Cleopatra was simply using you. She thought you were boring — and I agree with her.'

Vitellius was goggling in incomprehension at her words. On the couch, Ptolemy levered himself upright. 'Beware, Vitellius,' he called out weakly, 'she is not who she seems.'

'So,' said Cleopatra, 'you *have* been talking to the Doctor.'

The Doctor worked frantically over his console, his hands flying across the controls in a blur, readings and calculations flashing across the displays. He entered a final sequence of figures, then stood back, flexing his fingers, beaming in satisfaction. Balanced on top of the Time Rotor was a reel of fibre-optic cable. He plugged one end into a socket under the console, and backed out of the doors, unreeling the rest as he went. Through the mirror interface, he saw there were

people in the stateroom now. He ran out into the corridor, laying the cable as fast as he could. He pulled the other end from the reel as he reached Iam's doorway, and tossed it into the blackness. Something invisible caught it and drew it taut. 'Ahhh!' exclaimed Iam.

'Information.' The Doctor sprinted back to the makeshift control room and peered anxiously through the false mirror. He saw Vitellius take hold of Cleopatra. Take your time, he thought. Just stay out of here for another two minutes. Distantly, he could hear Iam muttering: 'Retroactive extrapolation ... Solar orientation ... That is how it's done ... '

'She is not Cleopatra,' continued Ptolemy, speaking defiantly despite his position. 'She is called Rani, and she has no place here.'

Cleopatra regarded him thoughtfully. 'I admire your spirit, Ptolemy Caesar. You have courage and some intelligence. Yes, you will make a better tool than this one here' She spoke as though Vitellius's hands were not laid upon her at that moment.

Vitellius snarled. 'What is this nonsense?' he demanded, shaking her violently. Gandos took a step towards the pair.

'I think,' said Cleopatra calmly, 'that your function from now on, Vitellius, will be purely ornamental.'

She raised a hand. A needle sprang out from one of her heavy rings, and she stabbed it into his upper arm.

Vitellius jerked away from her, clutching the wound as though it burned. His lips parted, but only a faint gasp emerged.

Slowly, he sank to the ground, a dark tint infusing his skin. Then a green tongue erupted grotesquely from his mouth. His arms and legs contorted, his fingers elongating and twisting into stalks swelling with buds, while his toes spread through the straps of his sandals into curling root tendrils. His body collapsed like a deflated balloon, and lush greenery pushed through the remains of his clothing with a swish and pop of spreading leaves. In moments, a large shrub lay on the cabin floor where Vitellius had fallen.

'How appropriately parochial,' Cleopatra commented mildly. 'A rubber plant!' She turned to Ptolemy, who was staring in horrified disbelief at the remains. 'A sample of my power, which you would do well to remember — '

A window panel suddenly blew out and tumbled away into the blue, and a blast of air rushed into the stateroom.

With it came Peri.

For a moment, Cleopatra was rendered speechless. Gandos sprang forward to face Peri, massive arms spread ready.

Peri waved the molecular cutter hand unit threateningly in front of him. 'Tell him this thing's dangerous,' she warned.

'Oh yes, it's the whining Miss Brown, isn't it?' said Cleopatra, recovering her composure. 'Your appearance has improved since we first met.' Her eyes narrowed, and she smiled thinly. 'Do you know your power-pack charge light is flashing? Gandos, she's unarmed —

kill her!'

Gandos grabbed at her throat. Peri caught his wrists, talons biting deep into the flesh, and held him off. For a moment, a look of surprise flickered over Gandos's face at finding his strength matched.

They stood locked together, swaying, muscles straining.

Cleopatra drew a long needle-like dart, glistening with venom, from her broad collar, and held it ready to throw. Ptolemy surged up from the couch and charged shoulder first, knocking the breath from her and sending her sprawling, the deadly dart spinning away into the corner of the room.

Inside the Rani's TARDIS, the Doctor tore the connections from the body of the real Cleopatra, and scooped her up in his arms.

Gandos still had the advantage of greater weight and Peri felt herself being forced backwards. Instinctively, she stopped resisting and deliberately fell onto her back and the folded cushion of her wings, tucking her legs up to her chest, her feet pressed into his stomach. As his weight bore down upon her, she kicked out with all her strength. He tumbled through the air over her head and disappeared from her view without a sound. Peri sprang to her feet, twisting round to face him again.

There was only the whistling space of the empty window frame.

Cleopatra let out a wild cry. She writhed on the floor as her features blurred and flowed. As Peri helped Ptolemy to his feet and released

his bonds, the last resemblance to Cleopatra faded, and the Rani's true form appeared.

She raged within herself.

The shock of the sudden and unexpected change drove cool calculation and reason temporarily from the Rani's mind, leaving only anger, frustration and loss. *Loss!* Yes, the Doctor had been right, curse him. She felt she had lost half of herself when he had taken the Cleopatra pattern from her. Taken? He was inside her TARDIS! And standing before her were two more enemies. Even as this realization dawned, her flailing arm brushed through the leaves of the rubber plant that had been Vitellius — and fell upon his holstered pistol.

With a hiss of satisfaction she tore it free, and, clasping the primitive and unfamiliar weapon in both hands, she pointed it wildly at Peri and Ptolemy and pulled the trigger.

The gun boomed. They dived for cover. The recoil astounded the Rani. It was as though the weapon kicked in her hands. The trigger was amazingly heavy. She fired again, and again, in a mad rage. Two shots went through the ceiling ...

And she froze.

Reason returned — too late.

Peri snatched Ptolemy up in her arms and dived for the window.

Inside the Rani's TARDIS, Iam called out joyfully: 'All working done. We all go now.'

The Rani plunged through the mirror into her control room just in time to see the Doctor's TARDIS dematerialize.

The first of the *Horus*'s gas cells exploded, sending a great bluish tongue of burning hydrogen up into the sky. The shockwave of the explosion tore the fabric from the upper curve of the hull, exposing its latticed ribs, and sent Peri and Ptolemy tumbling through the air.

The Rani dived back through the mirror into her stateroom dragging a cable behind her as a crackling sheet of flame rippled across the ceiling and the floor began to heel over. She rammed the connector end into a socket under the Oracle/console. The cabin door blew in and a ball of fire rolled towards her as she slammed her hand down on the controls.

One after another, the gas cells of the *Horus* exploded.

Fire consumed it even as it plunged out of the sky, its naked and crumpling metal skeleton enclosing nothing now but a hollow, furnace-like interior, yellow and orange flames of the fuel oil completing the work the hydrogen started. It fell amid a shower of fluttering strips of fabric, drifting downward in its wake like burning confetti.

Beating her wings heavily, Peri carried herself and Ptolemy clear of the dying airship.

Then it seemed to go cold for a moment.

The yellow dwarf-star lay in an outer spiral arm of the galaxy. A handful of attendant planets orbited about it, some close enough for lead to melt on their surfaces, others so far out that ammonia and methane cloaked them in icy desolation. But the orbital band with a mean distance of approximately ninety-four million miles was unoccupied.

At a certain point along this band, space itself began to distort and ripple.

There was a blaze of light.

A blue and white world and an attendant moon appeared where there had been nothing a moment before, falling smoothly along their appointed orbits as though they had always done so.

The last traces of vortex energy sparkled from the sky and were gone. A storm wind seemed to blow up from nowhere, setting Peri and Ptolemy spinning for a moment or two and clouds boiling across the land. Then it faded to a fitful gust, a zephyr and it, too, was gone.

There was the deepest of bass tones as the whole world trembled, settled, found a new equilibrium. Then that also slowly died away.

Normality was restored.

And, fifteen hundred yards up in the air, Peri found the power of flight leave her.

They started to fall. Her wings caught the air but were suddenly quite inadequate even for gliding. One by one, her feathers started to drop out and flutter away in their wake.

Peri looked helplessly into Ptolemy's eyes.

'Sorry,' she said simply.

The TARDIS materialized underneath them, lying on its side, its open doors uppermost. They passed between the doors, and Peri had a momentary glimpse of the control room flashing past at a strange angle. Then there was water below, a gentle force was slowing their fall, and they dropped out of the painted sky of the fresco into the TARDIS's swimming pool.

The remaining occupants of the Harena Maximus got cautiously to their feet after the brief earth tremor. For a moment it had grown unnaturally bright, and the dust, which the sudden storm blast of wind had stirred up, hazed the air, setting everybody coughing. At least the fighters seemed to have broken off their attack; the drone of their engines grew dim in the distance.

Then came a new sound.

It was a whirring, groaning noise that swelled steadily, the tone deepening. Then in the very centre of the arena, a rectangular blue box with a flashing light on the top faded into solidity out of the dusty air.

There was a surprising thump of reality, then all was quiet.

Before several thousand pairs of astonished eyes, a door in the side of the box opened, and Ptolemy Caesar stepped out onto the sand.

Such was the depth of their surprise, that he managed to walk quite five paces before the cheering started.

Epilogue

The Treasure Chamber of Cleopatra's Tomb was lit by a dozen wire-light bulbs. The exit hole the Doctor had cut in the roof had been repaired. A railing had been erected around the floor slab that opened onto the thieves' tunnel. The TARDIS now stood in the clear space at the centre of the chamber.

The Doctor was deep in conversation with Themos. Gaius Agricola and Aulus Glabrio were examining the TARDIS with interest.

Cassodorus, Decius and Tiro gazed fondly at the riches around them, and dreamed of what might have been. Rufinus and Strabo stood a

little to one side, self-consciously wearing freshly made armbands of the fledgling Civilian City Watch. After the actions of the Praetorians, Ptolemy had decided a new, more independent force was required to keep order.

Ptolemy himself was talking to Peri, a little apart from the others.

'Are you sure you will not reconsider?' he asked gently.

Peri smiled, a little sadly. 'I really don't think I'm ready to settle down just yet. You know, if I stayed here, I wouldn't just sit at home all day, I'd want to make changes in how things are done. I mean, you don't even have women senators!'

Ptolemy opened his mouth to give the obvious reply, when he checked himself, and said carefully: 'You have them in America?'

'Of course. You see, that's the sort of thing I'd try to change, and I really wouldn't want us to be fighting all the time.'

Ptolemy sighed in resignation. 'Still,' he added, 'life with you would not have been dull.'

Peri grinned. 'Don't worry, you'll find someone else. And who knows, we might be back someday — you can never tell with the Doctor. Meanwhile, you've got a lot of friends to help you get everything straight again.'

Ptolemy regarded the others for a moment. 'True. It is strange how circumstances have brought such varied people together. Perhaps this is a hopeful sign.'

Peri frowned slightly. 'What are you going to do about Cleopatra Selene? She did plot against Rome, after all, even if the Rani did hijack her scheme.'

'She will be returned to Alexandria when she has recovered from her ordeal, and I will take steps to limit her power. But there is hope.

The experience has mellowed her, I believe. She is less arrogant than before, and more open to new ideas.' He smiled. 'Well, we all must be so, of course, after what has happened.'

'A whole new world for you to explore,' agreed Peri, 'and half of it practically empty. That should keep you busy for a few years.'

'Yes. I'm having Themos head a group of scholars whose task will be to draw up a chart of the new stars to aid navigation.'

'That'll keep him happy. At least he doesn't have to worry about the sun falling on him any more. And you've got Glabrio and Agricola Senior to help you with administration, for a while. What about the rest of Cassodorus's gang?'

Ptolemy smiled. 'I must keep them busy at all costs, otherwise there's no telling what mischief they may get up to. How can I put their, ah, special talents to good use?'

'We have a saying about setting a thief to catch a thief There must be some really gruesome low-lifes around here you could do without.'

Ptolemy considered. 'Yes, I believe there is something in that idea

... '

The Doctor was waving.

'I think it's time to go,' said Peri.

'But you must have your parting gifts first.'

Ptolemy escorted her to join the others, and took up a position in front of the TARDIS.

'We are gathered here to bid farewell to two people who have given incalculable service to Rome in the few days they have been with us.

They deserve, but have declined, a public triumph, and requested they be allowed to depart as they came, without ceremony. However, it is only fitting that they take some small gifts with them, in addition to our gratitude.'

His big face beaming, Strabo stepped forward carrying a small shield like a tray, on which rested two objects.

Ptolemy took up the first one. 'For you, Doctor, in memory of your remarkable feat in the arena, the traditional gift to a retiring champion gladiator: a wooden sword — with a personal addition of my own.'

The sword was plainly carved, but the scabbard was wrought in silver, and studded with jewels.

The Doctor smiled and bowed. 'Thank you, First Consul,' he said sincerely.

'And for you, Peri Brown, in memory of your remarkable transformation, which I have special cause to be thankful for, I have chosen this from my mother's treasures, which seems appropriate.'

It was a brooch in the shape of an eagle, made of gold with turquoise wings and rubies for eyes.

'Remember our strange first meeting when you look upon it,' he added gently.

'I will,' Peri said, smiling, her eyes misty.

They made their farewells, and stepped into the TARDIS. The others stood back. The regular thrumming pulse of dematerialization filled the chamber, and the police box faded and was gone, leaving an empty space on the mosaic patterned floor.

Looking down on the design from above, and taking note of its hexagonal border, it closely resembled a modified Type Forty control console.

The TARDIS materialized in planetary orbit, and they took a last look at the blue and white globe of Terra Nova, circling its new sun.

Peri was quiet for some time, until she became aware the Doctor was looking at her. 'All right,' she said, finally, 'you can say I told you so.'

'Sorry?'

'About the danger of becoming something you're not. I thought it could be turned into a challenge, but it was addictive. I was getting high on power.' She grimaced. 'No pun intended.' She sighed. 'I sure will miss flying, though: low gravity diving's going to seem pretty tame after that.'

'Oh, you didn't do so badly,' said the Doctor generously. 'You showed great courage facing up to the transformation. And remember, the Rani, who should have known better, had already become habituated to the experience — to her detriment in the end.'

'Mmm. Well, at least she's finished with.'

The Doctor frowned thoughtfully, but did not reply.

'Looks peaceful, doesn't it?' commented Peri wistfully, turning her attention fully to the planet below. 'Say, what happens in the future, if they meet up with people from the original Earth?'

'It will teach humanity that the universe is a far stranger place than they imagined,' said the Doctor, cheerfully. He looked at her again and raised an inquiring eyebrow. 'Sorry you didn't stay?'

'Well ... No, I guess it wouldn't have worked out. Though Ptolemy came through as quite a guy in the end. I think he'll make a good leader.'

'Yes, I think so too. He's learnt of the limits and dangers of power, and has a challenge to match his abilities, though the struggle will now be with natural forces, rather than human ones.'

'There really are no other people on the world, except those that came with the segment that was copied?'

'That's right. I gave Iam enough information to extrapolate from existing life forms, so as to stock the rest of the globe with basic flora and fauna, but not people.'

'But what happened to Iam when he finished the job?'

The Doctor smiled to himself. 'Oh, I'm sure he's around somewhere,' he said vaguely.

'Hey, look!' Peri was pointing to the monitor. The Pacific basin was turning under them now, and Australia had just come into view.

However...

'It's upside down!' exclaimed Peri.

The Doctor flushed and gave an embarrassed little cough. 'Just a minor error — these things happen ... I didn't have much time, remember. Anyway, who's going to know, hmm?'

Peri smiled. 'Yeah, who's going to know ... '

The TARDIS faded into the blackness of space and was gone.

Tumbling along the same orbit it had occupied was another object that might also have been a blue police box — but then it, too, vanished.

Terra Nova continued peacefully on its way.

And infusing the bedrock of the world with his consciousness was Iam. And he sensed the life force flowing out across the globe around him, and knew he would never be lonely again.

Having established himself as a designer, artist and illustrator, CHRISTOPHER BULIS is now forging a career as a successful writer. He is the author of DOCTOR WHO — SHADOWMIND.

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